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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE MYSTERY OF A HOTEL ROOM

Watched by the man below, the unconscious girl was carried across the ladder and placed in the wagon.

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Mystery of a Hotel Room

OR,

NICK CARTER'S BEST WORK.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A NEW CASE FOR NICK CARTER.

The Midnight Marauders, who had, during many months, infested the neighborhood of the town of Westerly, in Michigan, burning buildings, slaughtering sheep, butchering cattle, murdering innocent horses, robbing farmers, pillaging houses, and otherwise committing outrages upon the community, were no more.

The mystery of their activities had been solved by Nick Carter, who was called to Westerly by a committee of citizens appointed for that purpose; self-appointed, to be sure, because they numbered the twenty-seven subscribers to a local telephone system over the wires of which, in a strangely mysterious way, information was invariably sent to the latest victim of what had been done to him.

These outrages, and the perpetrators of them, had proved to be mysterious in more ways than one, and the indignities they committed had finally resulted in a sort of reign of terror throughout that locality.

No one could understand why the subscribers to the telephone system were alone made victims of the marauders, and so, after every other expedient had been tried and found wanting, Nick Carter was sent for, and, after a time spent in investigation, had brought the leader of the marauders to such justice as could be meted out to him, and had arrested three of his followers, two men and a woman.

The last indignity committed by them had been the abduction of Sally Cross, the daughter of the local preacher, and, as it turned out, the niece of the man who perpetrated all these outrages.

Investigation proved that he was a lunatic; that several years before he had been committed to an asylum, from which ultimately he had escaped, and he had long since been supposed to be dead.

But the insane mind had cherished a bitter hatred and feeling of animosity against all the members of that community of which he had once been a respected resident, and this hatred and insane desire for vengeance against them had been directed more particularly against those who belonged to the telephone association, probably because James Stedman, for that was his name, had been the originator of it.

It was established after his capture that all of his acts were the result of his unsound reasoning and his insane desire for vengeance against persons who had never wronged him in the slightest degree.

The abduction of his niece had been the culminating act of his career. It had stirred the community as nothing else had ever done. But Stedman had had with him two men whose habits of smoking cigars and cigarettes, respectively, had supplied a clue to the detective, which, upon being followed industriously by him and by Chick, had resulted in the speedy capture of Stedman and the recovery of Sally Cross.

It was developed, after the capture, that James Sted-

man, in organizing the telephone association before he became insane, had studied deeply into the subject, and had himself become an expert lineman and electrician; and it had been his habit when he committed the outrages against his former neighbors to climb to the top of a pole located along the party line where the wrong had been done and from it, with a lineman's instrument, to notify in that mysterious way the victim of the outrage.

The close of the case might almost have been said to amount to a fiasco since the supposed criminal was really a lunatic and his associates were two men and a woman, who was the wife of one of them, who were utter strangers in that locality.

The arrest had taken place on what might be termed an island in a marsh, for, although it was not surrounded by water, it was enveloped by low and swampy land, to such an extent that it could be approached from only one direction, and that from a sort of causeway built sixty years before the happening of these events, and in utter disuse during the last forty years.

The relief and joy expressed by Reuben Cross, the minister, when Nick Carter restored his daughter to him, may better be imagined than described, although she asserted that at no time had she been in actual peril.

It was remembered that when she was a little child this crazed uncle of hers had been exceedingly fond of her, and, although no information on the subject could be drawn from him, it was supposed that in stealing her away from her home the madman had achieved a double purpose; that is, he had satisfied his desire for vengeance against his sister and her husband, who were Sally's parents, and had also pleased his own fancy by obtaining possession of the child he had once loved so dearly, now grown to womanhood.

Stedman was arraigned before a committee appointed by a judge of the supreme court, was pronounced insane, and recommitted to an asylum. His associates, the two men and the woman before mentioned, were sent to jail, charged with various felonies, and were left there awaiting the time when indictments should be found against them.

Nick Carter, who had established a secret telephone exchange at a hut in the middle of a forest, returned to it, stripped it of its contents, and prepared to take leave of the many friends he had made in and about Westerly.

Begged by the minister and other citizens to remain yet a few days longer among them, he sent his two assistants East, and consented to remain a guest of Reuben Cross until the following Sunday evening, when he would take his departure.

That would be three days hence.

Throughout all that region there were unmistakable evidences of joy over the happy ending of their troubles so involved in mystery until Nick Carter had come.

Naturally he was looked upon as the lion of the hour, and the day following the arrest of the wrongdoers had been one of reception on his part, for a stream of callers had come and gone from the parsonage from morning until evening.

Sunday, the evening of the third day after the arrest as before described, the detective attended church twice, and so listened to two sermons preached by Reuben Cross, both of which were devoted to a recapitulation of the events of the last six months, and to the morals which might be drawn from that experience.

After church there was an informal reception of the members of the congregation at the parsonage, and Nick Carter found himself again the centre of an eager and admiring group.

Many of them at this time were young people of the parish; young men and young women; friends and associates of Sally Cross, and she took it upon herself to present them singly and in person to Nick Carter; and the detective, having laughingly consented to an imitation of a state function, stood in the middle of the parlor at the rectory while these young people filed past him, being introduced by Sally, shaking hands with him each in turn, and offering some expression of their admiration for him.

It was all a humorous affair, and was so intended. The room rang with the laughter of the company, and never had there been a Sunday night when so much joy had been rampant at the rectory as then.

Nick Carter was interested in these young people. He was always interested in the youth of any community; in the development of the young.

He scanned each face as it passed him, interested in the various expressions of character he could read among them.

Twice during the ceremony his attention and interest was attracted by incidents that happened between Sally Cross, who was doing the introducing, and two young men who appeared before him to be presented, one when the procession first began to file past and the other just about as the mock ceremony was brought to a close.

On the first occasion the detective noticed a flush of pleasure, and detected an accent of pride in Sally's face and voice when she said:

"Good evening, Ben. I am very glad you came. I particularly wanted you to meet Mr. Carter. I was very anxious to have him know you. Mr. Carter, this is my friend, Benjamin Spaulding. He lives some distance from here, and I was not sure that he would come, although I wrote to him."

"And I take it that Mr. Spaulding is a very dear friend, indeed," replied the detective, smiling upon them both, for he thought he could read the evidences of more than mere friendly affection between these two.

A few other words were exchanged between them, and then Spaulding passed on to join the group of

those who had already been presented, and Sally resumed the duties of hostess.

The procession kept on for a long time after that, and then came the other incident which attracted the detective's attention and interest.

He saw Sally stiffen in her attitude; he saw another flush suffuse her face, and realized that her eyes darkened and widened, although this time it was not with pleasure, but rather with distaste and aversion.

He half turned his head to notice that a tall, dark-skinned, but handsome, youth of twenty years, or thereabouts, was approaching him, near the end of the line, and he knew that it was recognition of that particular young man that had given Sally the thrill of displeasure.

Presently the young man stood before the detective. Tall, straight as an Indian, lithe as a panther, with large and flashing eyes, and handsome face, with the grace of a leopard and something of the sleekness of that animal, too, with white and gleaming teeth, and altogether an attractive appearance, he did not impress one as a person who would impart displeasure or distaste to a young woman by the mere fact of his presence.

And yet when Sally spoke to him there was unmistakable dislike and aversion in her tone and manner.

"I did not know that you were here, Chauncy," she said coldly.

"You didn't suppose that I would consent to be left out of a function of this kind, did you, Sally?" the young man replied easily, and in a tone of voice that was entirely in keeping with his appearance.

"I hardly expected you," she responded as coldly as she had spoken before; and then she made the presentation.

"Mr. Carter," she said, with an assumption of dignity that she had not manifested before during the entire evening, "allow me to present to you my cousin, Mr. Chauncy Graeme. He is a resident of our village, but does not spend much time at home."

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Carter," said Graeme, with an inimitable smile which showed his gleaming teeth, and which lighted up his handsome face wonderfully. "As Sally says, I am not much at home. I only arrived in town late last night, and I am leaving again to-morrow. Nevertheless, I am glad to know one who has done so much for this neighborhood as you have."

Nick thanked him courteously, and marveled at the half-patronizing air of the youth, who seemed wonderfully self-possessed and sophisticated beyond his years.

When Graeme had passed on, Nick turned to Sally, and he said to her in a low tone:

"I am afraid, Miss Sally, that you are not particularly fond of your cousin, Chauncy."

"No," she replied; and changed the subject.

* * * * * * *

The function as described continued so long a time, and proved to be so interesting, that Nick Carter consented, at the earnest solicitation of Reuben Cross, to remain over until the following day before taking his departure for New York.

When the ceremonious part of the reception was past, the detective, with several others, was seated upon the piazza to enjoy a cigar.

Benjamin Spaulding was seated at his right, Sally Cross was at his left, and Chauncy Graeme had taken a position on the edge of the piazza, with his back against a post.

The detective had offered him a cigar, using the expression, "Do you smoke, Mr. Graeme?" and the latter had replied: "Yes, thank you, but I prefer cigarettes," and had lighted one which he took from a silver case, bearing a monogram which Nick could not read in the imperfect light which shone through the window upon the piazza. Spaulding had replied to the same friendly offer made by Nick that he did not smoke at all.

After that the three chatted together upon indifferent subjects until presently, having smoked and thrown away the remains of his second cigarette, Graeme rose to take his leave.

"I must bid you good night, and also good-by," he said. "I leave by an early train in the morning," and he extended his hand toward Nick Carter, which the latter received in the spirit in which it was offered.

Spaulding also shook hands with the young man, but when he approached Sally to bid her good-by, she pretended not to see the hand extended toward her, busying her own in some manner to avoid taking his, and replying coldly and distantly to his expressed regret at leaving.

Nick saw a half smile darken, rather than light up, the face of the handsome young man, who shrugged his shoulders, turned away, and, having bade the others good night, sauntered through the gate, and went out of sight along the street, whistling.

A few moments later Spaulding also said good night, and Sally walked to the front gate with him, where the two lingered for a few moments in a confidential conversation. When she returned, Nick noticed that her cheeks bore a heightened color; that her eyes were sparkling with unusual brightness, but also that she seemed strangely silent and disturbed.

She lingered only a few moments after that, then said good night and went to her room; the same room from which she had once been forcibly abducted by her crazed uncle, James Stedman.

"Just how is Graeme related to you, Mr. Cross?" Nick asked the minister, when they two were alone on the piazza together, and were on the point of retiring.

"He is only distantly related," was the reply, "but we call him cousin; Sally has been taught to so regard him all her life. His father and my wife were second cousins. His parents are dead. The young man inherited quite a fortune some time ago, and he has been in possession of it about a year or a little more."

"He is past twenty-one, then?"

"Yes, he is past twenty-two."

"He doesn't look it," said Nick.

"Sometimes he seems much older than that, Mr. Carter. I have been greatly worried about the boy, and have wished sometimes that he were more nearly related to me, in order that I might have an excuse for interfering in his selected pleasures, at times."

"You don't approve of him?"

"Hardly."

"He seems a very attractive young man."

"That is the greatest trouble about him, Mr. Carter. He is an attractive young man. He is, also, if I may use the term, an 'unmoral' young man. Please notice the distinction I make; I did not say immoral, I said 'unmoral.'"

"I understand you."

"I would like to talk further about him some time, Mr. Carter."

"Gladly, sir, if the opportunity offers."

The two men parted then for the night, Nick going to the room which had been allotted to his use, where he slept soundly until the sun, streaming in through his windows, awakened him.

He was dressed and ready to leave the room, when he was startled by a quick and peremptory rapping upon his door, and it opened instantly to admit Reuben Cross, who seemed strangely perturbed and frightened.

"What is it, Mr. Cross? What is the matter?" asked the detective.

"Sally!" exclaimed the stricken man. "She has disappeared again."

"What?" cried the detective, startled more than he would have admitted.

"Sally is gone," said the minister; and he buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

CHAPTER II.

AN ASTOUNDING CIRCUMSTANCE.

The disappearance of Sally Cross from her sleeping room was, this time, decidedly different from that other occasion which has been referred to in the foregoing chapter.

Her room was found to be in perfect order. The bed had not been occupied. Nothing had been disturbed. There was only one circumstance which likened that incident to that other one, and this existed in the fact that the same window was found open, and a ladder, whereby passage had been made from it to the forking branches of a cherry tree nearby, was still in place, where it had been used to facilitate her escape, for escape it seemed to be this time; not an abduction.

Investigation developed the fact that a suit case, and also a large Gladstone bag, belonging to Sally, had also disappeared with her, and that each had been packed full of her belongings.

Nick Carter lost no time in hastening to her room after the minister came to him with the information as described in the closing paragraph of the last chapter.

He saw at a glance, as he entered the room, that this had not been an occasion like the former one. Everything about the room indicated that Sally had gone from it of her own free will, and, to the best of the detective's judgment, her departure was not very long after the hour for retiring.

He had gone to his own room within half an hour after she bade him good night; he had dropped into sleep almost at once, and had slept soundly and well, undisturbed throughout the night.

It had been the same with Reuben Cross, and with Mrs. Cross.

Neither they nor the servants had been disturbed by any sound at all, and it was not until the minister went to his daughter's room to awaken her, that morning, that the discovery of her departure was made.

It struck Nick that Reuben Cross manifested more anguished sorrow than should have been occasioned by the facts as they were presented, and he presently drew the minister into the study and questioned him.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Cross," he said, "but I cannot help wondering if this is a matter with which I am called upon to meddle. It seems to me that you more than half expected some such thing as this to happen. If you wish me to seek your daughter, and to find her for you, I will do so, but I must first know everything about this circumstance which seems to be so plain to you."

Reuben Cross hesitated. Twice he attempted to reply, but restrained himself before words came. He walked to the study window, and stood before it for a time in silence, biting his lips, snapping his fingers against his thumbs, and otherwise denoting the nervous condition into which the circumstance had thrown him. But he turned, and came toward the detective after a time, and he said:

"I think, Mr. Carter, that if I knew what to say about this affair, I should not hesitate to be entirely frank with you. The point is that I do not know what to say, and I am afraid that in telling you what I feel, I will be influenced by my suspicions, rather than by my judgment."

"I do not in the least understand you, Mr. Cross," said Nick. "Do you suspect that your daughter was in love with some young man of the neighborhood—with some young man, of whom you do not approve, and that she has eloped with him?"

The minister bowed his head in affirmation. For a moment he made no reply; then, he said:

"I fear that to be the case, Mr. Carter."

"How long have you suspected this condition of mind on her part?"

"For the better part of a year, sir."

"Who, if I may ask, is the young man?"

"Chauncy Graeme."

"What do you say?" exclaimed the detective, as-

tonished out of his usual self-restraint by this unexpected announcement. He would not have been surprised at all had the name of Benjamin Spaulding been used in making answer to his question; only in that case there would have been no occasion for an elopement, because the attitude of the minister and his wife toward Spaulding had been of the warmest character.

Reuben Cross repeated the name of the handsome young man who was his distant kinsman.

Nick Carter laughed pleasantly, and he said in reply:

"I think, Mr. Cross, that you entirely misapprehend the circumstance. Your daughter has not eloped with Chauncy Graeme. I feel constrained to assure you of this, and to do it from no better knowledge than was afforded by my observation, last night."

Reuben Cross shook his head.

"That has been the general impression that Sally has succeeded in giving to everybody, Mr. Carter. But it is a wrong impression. Sally has always been fond of Chauncy. Their fondness for each other began when they were the merest children, and I don't think it has ever abated."

"There was no evidence of it last night; that is, of the fondness to which you refer; of its abatement there seemed to me to be every indication."

"There was a quarrel between them some time ago," said the minister thoughtfully. "I do not know what it was about, and I now suspect that it was not real. I now suspect that it was play-acting on the part of each of them, to pull the wool over my eyes."

"But why should that be necessary?"

"Because Sally knew, and Chauncy knew, also, that I would never consent to a union between them."

"Have you regarded him as in every way unworthy of her?"

"Entirely so; worse than that. Chauncy Graeme is an 'unmoral' young man. He has not an instinct for good in his soul. Sometimes I think he is like the animals, and has no soul at all. Ah, it is terrible, sir, this Monday morning awakening of mine."

"I am inclined to think, Mr. Cross, that you are the victim of your suspicions, rather than of your judgment, as you announced a little time ago. Is it your wish that I should go into this matter more deeply?"

"Yes, sir; distinctly so."

"What part does Benjamin Spaulding play in this affair?"

"No part at all, save only that he is, and always has been, in love with my daughter."

"And what has been her attitude toward him?"

"That of a friend."

"No more than that?"

"Never any more than that."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I feel positive of it."

"Yet, last night, Mr. Cross, I thought I detected every sign of affection between young Spaulding and your daughter; and every indication of contemptuous dislike on the part of your daughter toward Graeme."

"You were deceived."

"You say that as if you knew it to be so."

"I feel that I do know it to be so."

"Your judgment is perverted, my friend. Your daughter loves Ben Spaulding, and feels only distaste for Chauncy Graeme, if I am any reader of youthful signs; and I think I am."

"I might say, as you suggested a moment ago, Mr. Carter—that you speak with overpositiveness."

"I speak as I feel, and as my judgment dictated. The first thing learned by a detective in his profession is not to be influenced by mere suspicion, but to depend solely upon his judgment, which has its source in years of experience, and in the deep study of cause and effect. If I see a leaf traveling along the highway yonder, I know that a draft of air is carrying it past. If I see a flush upon a young woman's cheek, I know that some emotion has produced that flush. If the brightness of her eyes, the smile upon her lips, the tone of her voice, and the general expression of her features denote pleasure, I know that the flush was induced by a thrill of joy, or, at least, of anticipated happiness; but, if those side issues, to which I have referred, express distaste, I know, then, that the flush was induced by annoyance, and the anticipation of unpleasant moments. Twice, last night, I saw such flushes on the face of your daughter. Once they were accompanied by the expression of pleasure; on the other occasion by that of annoyance. The first one was when Benjamin Spaulding presented himself before me; the second time was when Chauncy Graeme appeared. I base my judgment upon those two unerring observations on my part."

"May God grant that you are correct in that, Mr. Carter."

"I believe that I am not mistaken," said Nick.

"But why, then, if you are right, was there an elopement at all?" exclaimed the minister, leaping to his feet, and pacing the floor.

"Possibly there has not been one," suggested the detective mildly.

"Not been one? Not, when there has been every evidence of it in Sally's room?"

"My experience tells me that evidence can be manufactured, sir."

"What do you mean by that!"

"I don't know that I have any satisfactory meaning for that statement. I was only endeavoring to assure you that it is not well ever to leap at conclusions. In doing so we are apt to find quite often that we have taken our leap in the dark, and that we alight upon insecure footing. May I suggest something, sir?"

"I wish you would."

"Use your telephone, and summon Benjamin Spaulding here; that is, if you know where to find him."

"He is at the hotel; or, should be."

"And Chauncy Graeme, also?"

"He had taken a room there, yes."

"Summon them both."

The minister permitted himself to smile bitterly, but he made no remark in reply. Instead he went to the telephone, and having called for the necessary number, asked that Benjamin Spaulding be sent to the 'phone.

Nick, watching and listening, saw Reuben Cross give a sudden start, and heard him cry out:

"What's that?"

Then for a time he seemed to listen intently at the receiver, and presently he replied over the wire:

"You amaze me! You utterly amaze me! Please ask Mr. Graeme to be good enough to come here to me at once;" and he smashed the receiver on the hook with a vehemence which was astonishing in a man of his calling.

Then he turned angrily to face Nick Carter, but it was anger at what he had heard over the telephone, not toward the detective.

"What is your information, Mr. Cross?" asked Nick with a reassuring smile.

"It is most amazing, sir." The minister was still angry, and for the moment was more like a man of the world than Nick had ever seen him. "The proprietor of the hotel informs me that Ben Spaulding paid his bill, and gave up his room at the hotel last night. He also informs me that Chauncy Graeme is still there, and is even now at the breakfast table."

"What do you understand from this complication of affairs, Mr. Cross?"

"I do not understand it at all. I cannot comprehend it. It is utterly beyond me. Sally could never have had occasion to run away with Ben. I would have given her to him, gladly. I would have approved of their marriage thanking God that they pleased each other. They should have had my blessing. I am overcome with amazement. I do not know what to say."

"We will await the arrival of Mr. Graeme," said Nick, "and, while we are waiting, I will leave you alone, so that you may collect your thoughts, and decide how best to proceed when he arrives. If you will accept a word of advice, you will treat your kinsman with all courtesy and kindness, and give him no sign, no indication, whatever, of the suspicions you have felt against him."

"I will endeavor to do as you say," was the reply.

Nick left him alone in the study, and went out upon the piazza, where he stood leaning against the same post where Chauncy Graeme had been seated the preceding evening.

While he stood there, his eyes wandered around the dooryard, and presently encountered the ladder which still stretched between the tree and window, by which Sally Cross was supposed to have made her flight. Then his glance wandered from object to object; to the tennis court on the lawn, to the picket fence that surrounded the minister's grounds, to the pathway between the piazza and the gate, and finally was arrested by two small, white objects lying in the grass beyond the gravel of the path which passed along in front of the piazza. The two white objects were the butts of cigarettes, and Nick approached them and secured them; then he uttered a low whistle of surprise.

Each of them bore a monogram easy to decipher; it was composed of the letters "C. G."

This fact was not so astounding in itself, since Nick knew that Chauncy Graeme had smoked those cigarettes, and had thrown those butts away; but once before, his attention had been particularly attracted to that same monogram on the stumps of cigarettes, and that other occasion came about during his pursuit of the midnight marauders immediately following the forcible abduction of Sally Cross from her home. Then he and Chick had found this same sort of cigarette stumps along the route they had traveled in trailing the abductors, and they had afforded the only visible clue by which the two detectives had been able to trace the abductors.

But when the abductors were finally arrested, there was no person among them, or near them, to suggest the identity of Chauncy Graeme.

The circumstance, to say the least, was an astounding one.

CHAPTER III.

AN ALARMING INTERRUPTION.

Chauncy Graeme came.

He opened the gate, and came sauntering up the gravel path toward the piazza, swinging his light cane, and comporting himself with the air of one who had not a care in all the world.

Handsome, debonair, careless in demeanor, perfect in dress and deportment, indifferent to all things save himself, he came forward, smoking another of those same cigarettes, the half of which he threw from him when he finally ascended the steps of the piazza and greeted the detective, who stood there awaiting him.

Reuben Cross had seen the young man approaching, and now appeared at the doorway.

"Step inside, Chauncy," he said. "I have something of importance to communicate to you."

"Nothing wrong, I hope," said Graeme, as he complied, following the minister through the hall into the study, while Nick Carter brought up the rear.

"Possibly the proprietor of the hotel told you that I asked for Benjamin first," said the minister, seating himself in his study chair and speaking with a calm reserve which surprised the detective, knowing as he did the recent perturbation of spirit undergone by Reuben Cross.

"No," said Graeme with apparent surprise. "Old Pinckney said nothing to me about that; he merely informed me that you wished to see me at once."

"When did you part with Benjamin?" asked the minister with the same forced calmness of tone and demeanor.

"Why, I parted with him here."

"Didn't you see him after you left here?"

"No, sir."

"Will you tell me where you went when you left my house last night?"

"Is that necessary, cousin Cross?" asked Graeme, for the first time showing evidence of resentment.

"No, Chauncy, it isn't; but I would be glad if you would answer me."

"I'm afraid, sir, I occupied myself in a manner of which you would not approve."

"Nevertheless, Chauncy, I would like to hear about it if you will tell me; and I will promise not to criticise you whatever it may have been that you did."

"I met some young friends of mine, cousin Cross, and we played cards together until almost daylight this morning."

"Sunday night!" exclaimed the horrified minister.

"Well, you see, sir," replied Graeme with a light laugh, "it wasn't Sunday night very long. Sunday night lasted only a little more than an hour after we began the game. It then became Monday morning, so you see we didn't do so very wrong after all."

"Were you gambling?"

"I am afraid that you would call it that, sir; there were small stakes on the games."

"You did not see Benjamin?"

"I have assured you of that already, sir."

"Did you know of his intention to leave town last evening?"

"Cousin Cross, I know nothing about Benjamin, or his movements or intentions. Our paths never meet; they are not even parallel. Mine, you would doubtless say, leads downward; his you would equally describe, without doubt, as leading upward. I am not any too energetic and I hate to climb hills, therefore I follow the easier pathway."

The young man shrugged his shoulders as if the subject of the conversation did not interest him, and only rendered him contemptuous.

Nick Carter had permitted the minister to do the questioning thus far, wondering what the demeanor of each party to the conversation would be. Now he interposed, and he took a course which surprised Reuben Cross into utter silence, as Nick intended that it should do.

"Mr. Graeme," he said, "I hope you will pardon me for butting in on this subject, but something has occurred to mystify your kinsman, and he has called you here, hoping that you might have an explanation to offer."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me what it is, Mr. Carter?"

"It has been reported to Mr. Cross over the telephone that Benjamin Spaulding left the hotel last night without occupying the room he had engaged. He stated no such intention while he was here, and indeed gave the impression that he intended to remain longer. There are reasons why Mr. Cross is anxious to know when, why, and how Benjamin Spaulding left this village."

Graeme shrugged his shoulders. Then he laughed aloud. Then he produced his cigarette case, opened it, and snapped it shut, remembering that he was not permitted to smoke in the minister's study; but he stood drumming with it against the knuckles of his left hand, and he replied, looking at the detective somewhat quizzically, through half closed lids, as he spoke:

"Mr. Carter, I haven't the least idea what Mr. Spaulding's intentions were or in what manner he might have carried them out. Mr. Spaulding and I have known each other since our earliest recollection. We have never been friends, although we have always been acquaintances. We have never quarreled openly, although we have always disliked each other. I am totally indifferent concerning what he did or intended to do, or what may have become of him. I know nothing about him, and I care less than nothing."

"There has been another disappearance during the night, Mr. Graeme," said the detective calmly.

"Yes?" was the indifferent reply.

"Sally has also gone away."

"Eh? What's that? What are you saying, Mr. Carter? Sally has gone away? Sally Cross?"

"Yes," said Nick.

"You're joking, aren't you?"

"No, I am making a serious-minded statement."

"Do you mean to say that she has run away with Ben Spaulding? Is that what you are getting at, Mr. Carter? Is that the thing you wish me to understand? That Sally and Ben Spaulding have eloped? Surely that is a joke."

"I said nothing about the manner of her going or the reasons she may have had for taking her departure," replied the detective slowly. "I only said that she had gone away."

"But, man, she had no occasion to run away with Ben Spaulding! Her father would have hired a livery team for them and harnessed the horses himself, if by doing so he could have married her to Ben."

"Chauncy!" cried the old man indignantly.

"Oh, it's true, sir, and you know it. Perhaps I put it a little bluntly, but I have said nothing that isn't true."

"Please be quiet, Mr. Cross," said Nick. "I think that Mr. Graeme and I can understand each other better if we are not interrupted."

"Would you mind telling me what you mean about all this muddle?" asked Graeme, addressing the detective.

"It was discovered this morning that Sally had left her home; that her bed had not been occupied," said Nick slowly, keeping his eyes intently fixed upon the face of the young man before him, and studying Graeme's expression with close scrutiny while he talked. "A ladder has been placed in position between the cherry tree and a window of her room. It is the same ladder which was used by the abductors of Sally

when she was stolen away not so very long ago. Many of her personal belongings have been taken with her; clothing and the like, to the extent of filling two bags."

"It would seem then that she went away willingly enough," said Graeme, biting his nether lip, and for the first time since the conversation began, manifesting an appearance of uneasiness.

"It would seem so," assented the detective.

"Then why did you telephone for Ben Spaulding if you thought she had run away with him?"

"Mr. Cross did not think so."

"Eh? I thought he did."

"No."

"What did he think about it?"

"He believed that she had eloped with you."

"With me?"

"Yes; with you."

The laughter in which Graeme indulged upon hearing that statement rang resonantly through the room.

Reuben Cross started to his feet, opened his lips to speak, but sat down again in silence. Nick Carter waited, watched, and listened.

"That is the best ever!" said Graeme. "So that is why you called up Spaulding," he demanded, with contempt in his tones, and turning toward the minister. "So that is why you expressed such amazement when you were told that I was at the breakfast table. By Jove, Reuben Cross, I suppose I ought to be offended; but I'm not. I am only intensely amused." He turned again to the detective. "Why, I can see through it with half an eye. It is as plain as a pike-staff. He who runs may read."

"Well," said Nick, "what do you read from it?"

"Sally is romantic," said Graeme. "I suppose that she was really in love with Spaulding, although I never suspected it. She has decided that an elopement would be an interesting affair—and so she has eloped."

Nick was watching the young man narrowly. Now he said:

"You say you never suspected that she was in love with Ben Spaulding?"

"No; I never did."

"May I ask a personal question, Mr. Graeme?"

"I'd rather you wouldn't, if it's all the same to you," was the prompt reply; and it was delivered with a quick tightening of his lips over his teeth, and with a sharper glint of his flashing eyes, as if he resented the question before it was asked, knowing what it was to be.

"Nevertheless, at the risk of offending you, I think I shall ask it," said Nick. "Do you perhaps think that Sally Cross was in love with you?"

"That isn't exactly the question I expected, Mr. Carter. I won't resent it, or the others which naturally follow. I see that you are quite intent upon getting at the crux of this matter. I will answer all your implied questions at once. I have all my life loved Sally Cross. I do not remember when it was not so. But she has never returned my affection. It is true that I do not believe she has given her love to Ben Spaulding; I knew that she had not given it to me."

"Was there another?"

"No; I think not."

"Have you an explanation to offer, Graeme?"

"Only the one already suggested. I think that she has run away with Ben Spaulding."

"Is that your honest opinion, based upon what you know of all the parties concerned?"

"It is."

What more might have been said on that subject at this time will never be known, for at that moment an unexpected interruption occurred which effectually changed every aspect of the affair, and placed it in line with one of the greatest mysteries that Nick Carter had ever been called upon to solve.

The three men in the study were startled by a commotion and the sound of many voices approaching the front gate.

The minister started to his feet with an expression of alarm. Chauncy Graeme clinched his right hand tightly over the cigarette case which he still held in the palm of it, and with his left dug the point of his cane sharply into the rug that covered the floor. Nick sprang to the window and looked out.

As he did so the front gate was thrown open and several men approached the house along the graveled path.

There were varying expressions of alarm upon their faces as they drew nearer, and there appeared to be a reason for it, for just beyond them came more men, some of whom held the front gate open, while the others, bearing between them an object which Nick recognized only too quickly, made a difficult passage-way between the gate posts.

The article in question was an improvised stretcher fashioned from an old door, and upon it was lying an object that was concealed from view by a sheet that had been thrown over it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ODOR OF PRUSSIC ACID.

Reuben Cross had also approached the window, and he, too, saw the object which the approaching men carried between them, and recognized what it must be.

Nick, after one glance through the window, turned quickly to look toward Chauncy Graeme.

The latter was standing, as already described, and although his attitude had stiffened, the expression of his face did not materially change save to give expression to that amazement which any person must have felt under like circumstances.

The minister uttered a loud cry and sprang toward the doorway which communicated with the hallway, and from thence to the piazza, but Nick Carter sprang before him, seized him and stopped him.

"Control yourself, Mr. Cross. Remember that we do not know what it is yet," he said rapidly.

Then he passed quickly from the house; so quickly that he met the men who bore the stretcher halfway between the gate and the front steps, and he stopped them there.

"Wait a moment," he commanded them; and when they stopped he reached forward and lifted one end of the sheet from the recumbent figure beneath it.

The thrill of utter surprise which passed through the detective then when he saw whose body it was, lying upon that stretcher, was such that he never forgot it. He had confidently expected to look down upon the still, dead face of Sally Cross, but instead he saw the unmistakable features of Benjamin Spaulding; but no less still, and dead, than he had thought to discover the other.

The face of the dead young man was almost in repose, but yet not quite so. There was an expression of pain still lingering about the lips as if the shock of death had come suddenly and the features had had no time to compose themselves afterward.

There was no mark visible anywhere upon the body. There was no indication of violence that the detective could see in that first glance, for he quickly replaced the sheet over the dead face and turned to meet the minister, who was already staggering down the piazza steps.

Nick seized him and held him.

"It is not Sally," he exclaimed; and the man so stricken an instant before staggered backward with a cry that was almost glad in its vehemence. It did not occur to him then to wonder who it was, or why the body had been brought to his house.

It was not Sally. He was assured of that. For the instant it was all that he cared to know.

But that revulsion of feeling lasted only a moment, then he reached out and seized Nick Carter's arm in a convulsive grasp.

"Who is it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Brace yourself," said Nick. "Control yourself, Mr. Cross. The knowledge will be a blow to you, although not as great a one as you anticipated. The young man is dead. He died suddenly. I don't know how or why, but I will find out."

"Who is it?" demanded the minister again.

"It is the body of Benjamin Spaulding."

"He is dead!"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"He was murdered?"

"We don't know that."

"You suspect it?"

"I do not even suspect it, Mr. Cross. I know that he was alive last night, and that he is here now, quite dead. There are no marks upon him that I could determine in that one glance. Calm yourself, and after a little we will investigate. But first, shall I have the body taken into the parlor of your house?"

"Yes; if you please, Mr. Carter," replied the old man brokenly.

"And in the meantime will you do as I shall ask of you?"

"Yes."

"Go back to your study then; remain there until I come for you. Leave everything to me."

Mrs. Cross had appeared from somewhere at the rear of the house, by this time, and she seized upon Graeme, who was in the doorway, and demanded of him what had happened and what was on the stretcher.

She was almost beside herself with fright, and the detective saw Graeme put one arm about her shoulders, and heard him say in a low tone that was distinctly kind and considerate:

"It isn't Sally. Don't be alarmed."

"Who is it?" she demanded; and Graeme replied in the same kindly tone of voice, still with his arm about her:

"Mr. Carter has just said that it is Benjamin Spaulding. I am afraid that he has been badly injured. Let me take you into the house."

He turned her around then, and half led, half forced her across the threshold again, and so took her through a door at the end of the hallway, and closed it after them.

Nick Carter had watched this proceeding from interested motives, and he confessed himself greatly surprised by it. It was not the sort of conduct he expected from Chauncy Graeme.

But it was above reproach, and quite worthy of entire commendation.

The detective directed the men to carry the body into the parlor. He told another to communicate with a physician and with an undertaker, over the telephone; and then having excluded all persons from that room, he stood guard at the door himself until the proper officials should arrive to take charge of affairs.

In the meantime the men who had brought the body to the minister's home, half filled the hallway and the piazza outside.

One of these men was John Turner, a native of the village, whom Nick Carter had occasion to know quite well, and the detective turned to him for information.

"Where was the body found, Turner?" he asked.

"In his room at the hotel," was the astounding reply.

"In his room at the hotel?" the detective repeated after him.

"Yes," said Turner. "He was supposed to have given up his room, and have gone away. It was not supposed that he occupied his room last night, but as he had not disturbed it at all since engaging it, the room was not visited by the servants of the hotel until a little while ago, when a guest arrived to whom it was allotted. It was the guest who found the body there, lying upon the bed."

"Fully dressed, as it is now?"

"Certainly; it has not been disturbed."

"But why was it taken out of the hotel and brought here? Did any one pass judgment upon it? Was the coroner summoned? Or a physician?"

"You ask your questions too rapidly for me, Mr. Carter. I don't know just why it was brought away from the hotel and fetched here. All that I know is I was called from the other side of the street to help carry it."

"Isn't there a coroner in this village, Turner?"

"Certainly. The doctor you have summoned is also the coroner."

"Doesn't he insist that permission shall be given before the body of a person who has died suddenly shall be disturbed?"

"Oh, I suppose that is the law, but it wasn't deemed necessary in this case."

"Why not?"

"The facts about it were too apparent."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What is the use of going through a lot of rigmarole and red tape when one already knows the whys and wherefores of the circumstance? Ben Spaulding has killed himself. That goes without saying, it seems to me."

"But how? I saw no marks upon him," said Nick.

"Poison."

"How do you know that?"

"Pinckney, the hotel proprietor, found the empty bottle lying beside him on the bed. He didn't want the body there, and he knew that the minister would receive it here. I suppose the thing was done a little bit hastily, and before any of us stopped to think much about it. Anyhow, it's here now, and so is the coroner, for there he comes."

Dr. Green was a middle-aged man, with shrewd, keen eyes and energetic manner. He was one of the guests who had been present at the parsonage the preceding evening, and he hurried forward to make himself known to Nick Carter again. The two disappeared together inside the room where the body had been taken.

Nick, who felt the responsibility of such a case and who always had a wholesome regard for the observance of the law, had been content to await the arrival of the coroner before going more deeply into the mystery; and now he stood a few feet distant, while the doctor, who was also the coroner, removed the concealing sheet from the body of the young man, who only last night was so full of life and the joy of living, and who now was dead, and who would soon be, in part, forgotten.

The doctor examined the half-closed eyes of the dead man, raising the lids and then closing them down again to remain so forevermore. He smelled at the lips, and then he raised himself instantly and pronounced the two words: "Prussic acid."

Indeed the odor of it in the room, confined as it was, had become plainly apparent, for the deadly drug possesses an unmistakable aroma which is exactly like that which arises from a box of bitter almonds, newly opened.

There was no necessity to make a further examination as to the cause of death; it was only too plainly apparent.

The undertaker arrived at that moment, and Mrs. Cross came into the room with him; also the minister himself, and Nick Carter left them and the doctor with the body, while he passed outside, and finding John Turner, again asked the man to accompany him to the hotel.

The detective felt the impulse to continue the investigation without delay, and suggested that they should proceed at once to the hotel. Turner willingly acquiesced in this request, and they had gone as far as the gate when hasty footsteps behind them and a softly spoken "I will go with you, gentlemen," announced the arrival of Chauncy Graeme.

"Terrible, isn't it, Mr. Carter?" he said, as the three walked along side by side, hastening their steps in the direction of the village hotel.

"It is inexplicable," replied the detective non-committally.

"Suicide?" asked Graeme, a moment later.

"It would appear so at first glance, Graeme, but it is impossible to be clear about anything just yet."

"What killed him? Was he shot, or stabbed, or knocked on the head? I didn't see the body, you know."

"The coroner has made no report upon it," replied the detective evasively.

"But you saw the body, didn't you? You were present with the coroner when he examined it, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Haven't you discovered what killed him?"

"Yes."

"Don't you want to tell me about it?"

"I have not the proper authority to tell anybody about it, Mr. Graeme, until the coroner has made public his own conclusions."

"Oh, I see. All that is rather far-fetched, don't you think? Just a little bit too particular in a case of this kind. That's my opinion, Mr. Carter."

"Possibly," said Nick.

There was nothing further said until they reached the hotel entrance, and in the meantime the detective had been going over in his mind all the occurrences of that morning, from the moment of the discovery of Sally's absence from her home, to the interrupted conversation between the minister and Graeme and himself in the study.

As they were about to ascend the hotel steps, Nick turned to Graeme and said, in a low tone:

"Was your dislike for Spaulding so pronounced that you would hesitate to assist me in solving this mystery, Mr. Graeme?"

"Not at all, sir. I should be only too glad to help you if I can do so."

"In that case, I will ask you to remain beside me for a time. I may need you."

"All right, Mr. Carter. I won't be far away."

They found that a considerable number of people had gathered in and around the hotel, for the news of the discovery had flown like wildfire around the village, and, like a conflagration, it had called out everybody who was not prevented from coming.

Pinckney, the proprietor of the hotel, more from selfish motives than because of any desire to assist justice, had rigorously excluded all these curious ones from the room in which the body had been found. He did not want his carpets trampled upon and his furniture abused. It was because of this fact that Nick Carter found the room that had been engaged, but, supposedly, not made use of by Benjamin Spaulding, almost in the same condition as when the dead body was discovered stretched upon the bed within it.

The imprint of Spaulding's body could be seen on the counterpane of the bed.

The small vial, which Turner had described as being a bottle found by Pinckney beside the corpse, was now on the bureau where the landlord had tossed it.

It was of the size which will hold an ounce of fluid, and the odor of bitter almonds still clung about it. The towels which hung on the rack, above the wash stand, had not been disturbed; apparently not one of them had been used. The pitcher, standing inside the bowl, was filled to the ears with water. Chairs were as they had doubtless been arranged by a careful housemaid, and the room presented the appearance of having been used not at all.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF A HOTEL ROOM.

Chauncy Graeme, John Turner, proprietor Pinckney, and Nick Carter were the only persons who entered that room at the time.

The detective had had a distinct reason in giving the invitation to Chauncy Graeme to remain near at hand, and to assist him in any work there might be to do; connected with a further investigation of the death of Spaulding.

It would not be correct to say that the detective was entirely uninfluenced by the things that Reuben Cross had said that morning, respecting the darkly handsome young man whom the rector had at first supposed to be his daughter's companion in the elopement.

Nick had watched Graeme narrowly all that morning, and he had seen nothing about him to criticise very sharply.

The young man's manner might be described as unfeeling, in some respects, and yet, was it so?

He had certainly shown consideration for Mrs. Cross, at the doorway of the house, when he had led her away toward the dining room, and he had conducted himself throughout all the occurrences of that morning with unmistakable self-possession, courtesy, and good breeding.

Yet, there was an indefinable something about him which jarred upon the senses of the detective.

What it was Nick Carter could not have told himself. It was rather an instinctive distaste for the character of the young man, than a dislike for anything that pertained openly to him.

The occurrences of the preceding night were now more mysterious than ever.

Sally Cross had disappeared, and the evidences left in her room pointed to the suggestion that she had gone away willingly, and perhaps gladly.

Two young men had been suspected of eloping with her. One by the father of the girl, and the other by the detective, who was his guest.

Now, one of those young men was dead, and his body had been found in the room previously engaged by him at the village hotel; the other was present in that room, assisting Nick Carter in the investigation he had undertaken.

It was a most complex condition of affairs.

Sally Cross could not have eloped with either of them.

The appearance and condition of the body of Benjamin Spaulding had indicated that he had been dead many hours when it was discovered in the aforesaid room. The story told by Chauncy Graeme related that he had passed the entire night in playing cards with certain unnamed and unknown friends.

It would be necessary, in order to connect the disappearance of Sally Cross with the death of Spaulding, or with the card playing of Graeme, to fix upon the hours when each incident had occurred.

Sally had gone to her room at ten o'clock Sunday night. Nick Carter had gone to his room and retired, half an hour later, and it was not supposable that Sally had left the house, or had been taken from it (if by any stretch of the imagination the latter theory could be adopted), before eleven o'clock, and probably not until after, or at least near, midnight.

Graeme had created the assumption that his card game began some time after half-past ten, or at about that time. He had stated in his conversation with the minister that they had played cards a little more than an hour, on Sunday, which would mean that they began the game before eleven o'clock Sunday night.

The detective had turned all these considerations over in his mind, carefully, while on the way from the parsonage to the hotel, and it was because of them, because of the several mysteries created by them, and because of the inscrutable nature of Graeme's character, that the detective had invited the young man to remain near him. Deep down in his heart, Nick Carter could not deny himself the sensation of feeling that time would develop a deeper knowledge on the part of Chauncy Graeme, concerning the mysteries of the past night, than now appeared.

The detective left his three companions standing in the centre of the room while he went about it, from end to end, making a quick examination of its condition.

We have already described what that was, and that the detective found nothing whatever in his search.

"Mr. Pinckney," he said, presently, to the proprietor, "when did you last see Benjamin Spaulding alive?"

"About half-past five yesterday afternoon," was the reply.

"Do you mean that that was positively the last time you saw him?"

"I do."

"Who saw him when he returned to the hotel after that time?"

"No one saw him, for he didn't return to the hotel."

"But I have been informed that he paid for and relinquished the room he had engaged, and that he did it after he left the parsonage; and he did not leave there until about ten o'clock."

"He did, Mr. Carter. He gave up his room and sent for his grip, which was downstairs in the office awaiting his return from the parsonage. But he didn't do it himself. He sent a messenger to do it for him."

"Indeed. I did not so understand it. Who was the messenger?"

"Tom Tinker."

"Who is Tom Tinker?"

"Don't you know who Tom Tinker is, Mr. Carter?"

"If I did, I wouldn't ask you."

"Why, Tom is a sort of a character in this town. He is regarded as half foolish, by some, and I guess they ain't far wrong. He is a sort of man-of-all-work; a doer of odd jobs and runner of errands; an assistant hostler at my stables; in short, he is the handy man of Westerly."

"Tell me what time he came to the hotel, and what he said about Mr. Spaulding when the room was given up."

"It was about half-past ten, or a quarter to eleven, when Tom entered the hotel office. I was behind the desk, and he told me that Ben had sent for his satchel.

I asked him what for, being rather surprised, and he said that Ben was suddenly called away, and had sent him to pay whatever bill there might be against him, and to take the satchel to him. I asked Tom where Ben was at the time, and he said that they were to meet down at the corner. Ben didn't owe me anything, only for his dinner, and Tom paid that out of a dollar bill he handed to me, saying that the change belonged to him. I gave him the satchel, and he went away."

"Was there nothing about the circumstance to excite your suspicion, Mr. Pinckney?"

"I didn't think of such a thing."

"You have known Ben Spaulding all his life?"

"Ever since he was born."

"Mr. Turner told me that you used the expression that Spaulding had killed himself, at the time when you found the body. Is that true?"

"I guess it is. That was my idea."

"Had you any reason for entertaining that idea, other than the one created by the incident itself?"

"No; I don't think I had."

"Why, then, did you jump at such a conclusion?"

"Simply because there wasn't any other explanation to give to it."

"Do you now think that that was a reasonable explanation?"

"I think it is the most reasonable one I could find."

"You say you saw him here, at the hotel, at half-past five?"

"Yes; thereabouts."

"He did not take supper here?"

"No. He was invited out to supper, so he said."

"Where?"

"At Dr. Green's."

Nick remembered that he had seen Spaulding in Dr. Green's pew, at the church, during service the preceding evening, and that they had all gone together to the parsonage, from there.

"His dead body having been found in the room he had engaged," said the detective, after a pause, "indicates that Spaulding did return to this hotel, after you saw him about half-past five, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does."

"You had not heard of his presence at the hotel, or near it, during that interval, Mr. Pinckney?"

"No, sir."

"If he had been seen in the hotel, do you think you would have known about it?"

"Mr. Carter, if anybody had seen him anywhere near this hotel last evening, I would know about it now, after what has occurred. Any resident of this town would have tumbled over himself to get here and tell me. It's the gossipiest place you ever saw."

"Tell me how the body was discovered."

"Why, a man drove here with a horse and buggy this morning, put his horse in the stable, and engaged a room for the day and night. I roomed him myself, and gave him the one Spaulding had taken. It is the best room in the house. I then took the key from the rack, and led the stranger to the room. I opened the door——"

"Was the door locked, Pinckney?"

"It certainly was. I hadn't thought of that before."

"You opened it with the key?"

"I did."

"Is there another key to that door?"

"There's a pass key in the office, and another pass key which the chambermaid carries on her ring, but that's all."

"There is not another regular key?"

"No; but the lock isn't a difficult one."

"Go on, please, with what you were telling me."

"Well, that's about all. I opened the door, and stepped inside to usher the stranger into the room, and I discovered the body lying on the bed. Of course, I was shocked. Who wouldn't be? So was the stranger. But he came forward with me to the bedside, and, after convincing ourselves that Ben was dead, we went out of the room again. That is the whole story as far as I know it. You can't blame me for losing no time in getting the body out of that room, and out of the hotel. I've got my business to look after, and hotel guests don't like to occupy rooms where dead bodies have been found."

"How, in your opinion, did Ben Spaulding enter this room without being seen?"

"I'll have to give that up, Mr. Carter."

"Have you made no effort to explain the circumstance in your own mind?"

"No; I have not. I had not really thought of it before."

"What suggestion have you to offer about it, Graeme?" asked Nick, turning suddenly upon the young man.

"I'm afraid I'll have to do as Pinckney did; give it up," was the reply, although it was not said unfeelingly.

"Have you any opinion about it, Turner?" asked Nick, turning to the other man.

"No, sir; I don't think I have. It seems a great

puzzle to me. I cannot help thinking that somebody must have seen Ben when he came back here—if he did come back."

The suggestion conveyed by the last five words uttered by Turner, was exactly in line with a theory that had already occurred to the detective, and Nick gave a warning glance at the man, to indicate that he wished him to say no more on the subject at that moment, while Pinckney exclaimed:

"Well, he did come back, didn't he? The fact that we found him here proves that."

"Yes," said Turner, taking note of the detective's glance. "I was about to suggest to Mr. Carter that it would be a good idea to find Tom Tinker, and interview him."

"I think so myself," said Nick, "if someone will find him for me. I do not know the man by sight."

"He might be somewhere around the stables of the hotel," suggested Pinckney.

"Or at the harness shop down the street, which is his favorite resort," said Graeme.

"Suppose, then," remarked Nick, "that you, Graeme, go to the harness shop, and if you find him there, bring him to me here; and you, Pinckney, will please ascertain if he is anywhere in the vicinity of the hotel. In the meantime, Mr. Turner and I will await you here."

"You want him brought to this room?" asked Pinckney.

"Yes, please."

The two men went out, leaving Turner and the detective alone together.

"I don't know whether I made a fool of myself or not," said Turner, the moment they were alone. "But the fact that that door was locked when Pinckney and the stranger came to the room this morning, and the other fact that there was no key to it anywhere about, seemed mighty strange to me. I don't suppose it occurred to you to search poor Ben's pockets, did it?"

"Yes," said Nick. "I examined the contents of his pockets. I always do that in any case of this sort."

Turner stepped to the room door, secured the key of it, and returned, passing it to Nick.

"Did you find any such key as that in any of his pockets?" he asked.

"No, Turner, I did not. I knew that, already, before you brought the key to me."

"Then, doesn't the whole circumstance strike you just as mysteriously as it did me?"

"Yes, Turner, it does."

"Well, Mr. Carter, that explains why I used those last five words which made you shoot me that warning glance."

"I understand."

"You don't suppose, do you, that he came back here purposely to kill himself, and that he managed somehow to climb in through the window?" asked Turner.

Nick was silent a moment; then he said:

"I am rather inclined to the opinion that however Benjamin Spaulding met his death, he returned to the room through one of the two windows it contains. That is a point which I mean to investigate thoroughly."

CHAPTER VI.

TOM TINKER, THE VILLAGE FOOL.

Leaving Turner standing in the middle of the floor, the detective approached the window for the second time, and proceeded to give it his close attention.

He felt that the complications of the case were rapidly assuming amazing proportions, and he could not deny to himself the instinctive belief that the development of the mystery would eventually involve Chauncy Graeme. Nevertheless, he had as yet not even a faint idea as to how it might be brought about.

The crowd, which had gathered about the hotel, were still there, and Nick did not care to pursue his investigations before so many eyes, so he contented himself for the present with staring through the window at the roof of the porch just beneath it; but he observed nothing to attract his attention.

A moment later the door opened, and the detective turned about, to discover that Graeme had returned, and that he was accompanied by an individual who Nick had no doubt was the half-witted character of the town, Tom Tinker.

As soon as Graeme entered the room, he exclaimed:

"I'm back again, Carter. This is——"

He paused abruptly in whatever it was he was about to say, for the detective held up a protesting hand, which mutely demanded silence.

"Graeme," he interrupted, "I will ask you and Mr. Turner to leave me alone in this room with this man, if you please. I wish to talk with him alone."

"But——" Graeme began, and the detective once more interrupted him.

"Please wait just outside the door for me," he said, calmly, but with decision. "Also, I will ask you to be so good as to refuse admittance to others, until I give permission."

He stepped to the door and opened it, holding it so until Graeme and Turner had passed outside, when he closed and fastened it, turning the key in the lock. Then he turned to the man who was called Tom Tinker.

It was a queer specimen of humanity which now confronted the detective.

A man who might have been anywhere between forty and sixty years old, thin almost to emaciation, with a shock of unkempt, sandy hair that had streaks of gray in it, and who held in one hand a battered and crownless thing that had once been a derby hat.

Shirt, trousers, and shoes seemed to be his only garments, and the trousers, supported by a single suspender, had been made originally for a man three times Tinker's size. A week's growth of beard covered his face, which was far from clean. His watery eyes were almost devoid of expression; he held his mouth open, breathing through it, and there was a half grin in his expression, which disclosed his ill-formed and uncared-for teeth.

His shirt was open at the throat, buttonless; the sleeves were rolled up almost to the shoulders, and this latter fact revealed the only really astonishing fact about the appearance of the man, for his arms were almost apelike in their great length, and they were knotted with muscles which might well have excited the envy of many a practiced athlete.

Perceiving the muscular appearance of the arms, Nick looked with more care at the man, and discovered that the thinness, which was at first so apparent, was of the character which denoted unusual strength of that sort which is called wiry.

"So, you are Tom Tinker, are you?" the detective asked smilingly, by way of securing an opening to the conversation which was to ensue.

"Uh huh," was the grunted reply.

"You came to the hotel to get Ben Spaulding's satchel, last night, didn't you, Tom?"

"Uh huh."

"What time was that?"

"Dunno."

"It was rather late in the evening, wasn't it?"

"Uh huh."

"Who sent you after the satchel?"

"Ben."

"Do you mean that Mr. Spaulding sent you?"

"Uh huh."

"Where did you meet him, when he sent you after the satchel?"

"Down at the corner."

"What corner?"

"The church corner."

"Did you meet him there by appointment?"

"Huh?"

"Did he ask you to meet him there?"

"Nope."

"You met by accident?"

"Huh?"

"Were you looking for him when you met him there?"

"Nope."

"How did it happen that you were on the street so late at night, Tom?"

"Always on the street—night an' day."

"You are sure that it was Ben Spaulding whom you met?"

"Uh huh."

"Tell me what he said to you."

"Sent me after the satchel; gev me a dollar to pay for his dinner; said I could have what was left; said he didn't want to go to the hotel himself."

"Did he say why he didn't wish to visit the hotel himself, just then?"

"Nope."

"Do you know why he did not wish to come here?"

"Nope."

"Did he say anything more to you, just then?"

"Uh huh."

"What was it?"

"Said he would wait for me there."

"Did he wait?"

"Uh huh."

"What happened when you returned to him with the satchel?"

"Nothin'."

"Did he say anything more at that time?"

"Nope."

"You are about as communicative as a clam, Tom."

"Uh huh."

"Wasn't anything more said between you at parting?"

"Nope. Just good night. He gave me another quarter."

"Which way did he go, after he left you?"

"Dunno. Didn't watch him. Left him standin' right thar. Didn't see him go anywhere."

"Where did you go, after that?"

"Went to the barn."

"What barn?"

"Hotel barn. Slept there. Usually do, this time uh year."

"Did you see Chauncy Graeme last night, *after* you met Spaulding?"

"Nope."

"You know that Spaulding is dead, don't you?"

"Uh huh."

"Do you know, or can you guess, who killed him?"

"Nope."

"Do you think that he was murdered?"

"Dunno. Heard he killed himself."

"Who told you that?"

"Everybody."

"How long have you lived in this village, Tom?"

"Always."

"How long have you known Spaulding and Graeme?"

"Always."

"Did you like Spaulding?"

"Uh huh."

"And Graeme? Do you like him, too?"

For just one wrathful instant Tinker's eyes blazed; then they resumed their former expressionless stare.

"Hate him!" he said; but he made the remark without expression.

"Why do you hate Graeme, Tom?"

"Hate him; dunno why. 'Fraid uh him."

"You are afraid of Graeme?"

"Uh huh."

"Why?"

"Dunno. Ain't afraid uh nobody else but him, though. Makes me creep. I'm scairt uh him."

The detective took a step nearer to the half-witted man, and, holding him as well as he could by a look, he asked, quietly:

"Tom, are you sure that it was not Graeme, instead of Spaulding, whom you met at the corner, and who sent you after the satchel?"

"Uh huh."

But, as Tinker made that reply, not differently from the others of the same sort during the conversation, the staring, watery eyes for the first time left the detective's face, and sought the ceiling over Nick Carter's head; and the latter could have sworn that there had come a sudden flicker of fear into them.

"Are you quite sure?" the detective persisted.

"Uh huh."

"Tom, how long had you been wandering about the village, last night, before you say you met Ben Spaulding, by accident, at the church corner?"

"Dunno. Long time." (Nick fancied that the man shuddered involuntarily, as he made the reply.)

"Where had you been before you met Spaulding?"

"All over. Everywhere."

"Were you waiting for somebody? Whom were you expecting to meet when you encountered Spaulding?"

"Nobody."

The detective walked to the window, or, rather, toward it, but he stopped when he came within range of the mirror over the bureau, so that he could observe Tinker without the latter's knowledge of the fact; but the latter remained stolidly where the detective had left him, without altering his position or the expression of his face.

Suddenly the detective wheeled upon the man and demanded sharply:

"Tinker, what time was it when you saw Sally Cross, last night? Answer me. You *did* see her, didn't you, *after* you met Spaulding?"

It was a chance shot, but it told. Before Tinker realized what he was saying, he replied to the detective's question with his usual "Uh huh."

CHAPTER VII.

A PHASE OF THE THIRD DEGREE.

"Where were you when you saw Sally Cross?" demanded the detective, in the same sharp tone of voice, pursuing the advantage he had momentarily gained.

But the man, evidently startled by the half betrayal into which he had been drawn, lapsed into a still deeper state of apparent imbecility than he had formerly assumed; and that a great deal of it was assumption, the detective no longer doubted.

While Tinker remained staring at him, the detective repeated the question, and the man replied:

"Dunno. Don't remember."

"You lied to me just now, Tinker, when you told me that you went to the hotel barn, and went to sleep, after leaving Spaulding at the church corner. You lied about that, didn't you, my man?"

"Uh huh."

"Why did you lie about it?"

"Dunno. Just lied; that all."

"You were told to lie about it, weren't you?"

"Huh?"

"You heard what I said. Answer me."

"Yes—I lied to you—when I said that I saw Sally last night. 'Twasn't last night, it was the night afore, when I saw her."

"So; that is your dodge now, is it?"

"Uh huh."

The detective, greatly perplexed by the attitude of the man he was questioning, hesitated a moment before pursuing his search, and as he did so, happened to cast his eyes downward, so that his glance rested for a moment on Tinker's much-worn shoes.

He noticed, as he looked, that the old-fashioned ingrain carpet which covered the floor of that room, had been drawn into a half wrinkle beneath one of Tinker's feet, exactly as would have been the effect if a small carpet stretcher had been pressed against it.

Without a word, Nick turned and crossed quickly to the window, through which he had observed the shingled roof over the porch, while he was waiting with Turner in that room for the coming of the man he was now questioning.

He had recalled the fact that he had then noticed several peculiar marks on the shingles of the porch roof, although he had paid almost no attention to them. Indeed, he had decided, because of the throng below, to defer further examination of the roof till later.

But now he went again to the window to see those marks.

What he saw now, and riveted his attention for a moment upon, were indentations made in the weather-worn shingles—four separate sets of those indentations, each representing, in form, an inverted letter T; thus:

Each of the marks had been formed by five distinct punctures.

On the previous occasion, when Turner was in the room with him, Nick had noticed only one of these marks, but now, as he returned to the window and studied the roof of the porch with more attention, he saw that there were four of them made quite distinctly, and that there were two others that were less distinct. He returned to the centre of the room.

"Sit down, Tinker," he said, drawing a chair forward.

The man complied, and Nick drew forward a second chair.

"Now, put your legs across this chair," he said.

"What for? What are you goin' to do to me?"

"Nothing at all. I merely wish to see the soles of your shoes."

"Oh," said Tinker, and he deliberately raised his legs, and deposited them according to the suggestion made by the detective.

Just as Nick had expected to discover, five hobnails had been driven into the sole of each of the shoes, and they precisely corresponded with the marks on the roof over the porch. The detective had not the least doubt that they would fit those marks, if he should attempt the experiment.

"Tinker," he said, "you have lately been out there on the roof over the porch, haven't you?"

"Uh huh," was the calm reply, and the ready admission of the apparent fact was somewhat disconcerting to the detective.

"When was it?" he demanded. "Tell me the truth, now. It won't do you any good to lie."

"Ain't got no call to lie, as I know of," was the stolid reply.

"Well, when were you there? When were you on that roof?"

"Day before yesterday—no, yesterday."

"Wasn't it last night, when you were there?"

"No; yesterday."

"Why were you there?"

"Pinckney sent me."

"What for?"

"Had to fix the blind. Catch wouldn't work."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Uh huh."

"How did you get upon the roof? From the outside, by a ladder, or through the window?"

"Both ways."

"What time was that, yesterday?"

"Dunno. Ask Pinckney."

"Is the fellow telling me the truth?" the detective asked himself; and yet even as he put the question he knew that the reply should be in the affirmative.

For a moment he remained silent after that, going over in his mind all that had occurred thus far in the strange case he was trying to master.

On the face of it, nine investigators out of ten would have leaped to the conclusion that it was a case of suicide, and let it go at that; but Nick Carter was convinced, even against his judgment, that Ben Spaulding had not destroyed himself. At all events, he meant to pursue the investigation until he satisfied his own conscience.

Presently he stepped to the door, and opening it just a little, he called to Pinckney, the proprietor of the hotel, and, having admitted him to the room, again closed and locked the door.

"Mr. Pinckney," he said, "did you send Tinker to

the roof of that porch, yesterday, to make some repairs to the blinds?"

"I did," was the ready reply.

"What time of the day was that?"

"Some time in the forenoon."

"Did he use a ladder to get upon the roof, or did he reach it through the window?"

"I think he used both ways, Mr. Carter; but why do you ask?"

"Merely to discover if Tinker has told me the truth in reply to certain questions I have asked him."

"But I don't understand——"

"It isn't necessary that you should understand, just now. It will all be made plain to you, later on."

"Thank you. Do you want anything more of me, just now?"

"No."

"I've got a whole raft of things to do, and——"

"You may go. Take Tinker with you. I have asked him all the questions I care to, for the present."

He opened the door, then, to permit the egress of the two men, and as they passed out, he motioned to Graeme to enter—and again he closed and fastened the door, to the evident astonishment of the younger man.

But it was merely surprise that Graeme manifested. There was in it no touch of fear. Instead, the young man dropped easily upon the same chair that Tinker had occupied, lighted one of his inevitable cigarettes, blew a mouthful of smoke into the air, smiled upon the detective, and said:

"I have heard and read a great deal about the so-called Third Degree, as practiced by the police department in the city of New York; is this a phase of it, Mr. Carter? First, Tinker; then Pinckney and Tinker; then, your humble servant. I declare, it is becoming interesting."

But, shrewd as the young man evidently was, he was no match for the trained detective, as he was presently to discover.

Nick Carter was determined to play this precocious young man against himself; to appear to take Graeme into his confidence, believing that in such a manner he could disarm him in a sense. So, now, with the utmost appearance of cordiality, he replied:

"I must remind you of something I said to you at the moment of entering the hotel; I asked for your assistance in unraveling this mystery, did I not?"

"Yes; to be sure. But, my dear chap, where is the mystery? I confess I see none—save, of course, in the disappearance of Sally Cross."

"Don't you see any mystery in the death of Spaulding?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so; there is a mystery concerning *why* he should have killed himself, I suppose; a mystery as to why he should have taken the extraordinary precautions he did, in committing suicide."

"Graeme, are you positive in your own mind that he *did* kill himself?"

"Eh? What's that? I—oh, come now; you don't mean to suggest that he was murdered, do you, Carter?"

"It is my opinion that he was killed by another agency than his own," replied the detective calmly, "and I want you to assist me in getting at the truth."

The young man chuckled audibly.

"Of course, I will help, if you will tell me what to do," he said easily, "but to my mind, such a view of the case is preposterous. It's as plain as the nose on your face that Ben killed himself, that he came to this room purposely to do so, and that he had prepared in advance for the act. The presence of the acid bottle is proof of that, isn't it? The only mystery about it, to my mind, is *why he did it*, but even that mystery will develop, I think, when we have found Sally Cross. Don't you think she ought to hold the mystery?"

"Possibly."

"Do you really hold to the theory of murder, Carter?"

"I regard it as a possibility, and I wish to prove that it was not one before I proceed on the other hypothesis."

"Humph! Who are you going to charge with the murder, then?"

"I haven't thought as to that—yet."

"Why not accuse Tinker?" asked the young man derisively, and with unconcealed contempt in his tone. "He would be as likely a murderer as any one, wouldn't he?"

"Yes; quite so, Graeme," was the cool reply—and Graeme stared.

"Well, by thunder!" he exclaimed, at last, "for downright originality of thought, Mr. Carter, you take the cake. Tom Tinker, indeed!" He laughed immoderately, but Nick thought that his laughter lacked the true ring.

"Come here a moment," said the detective, and he crossed the room to the window.

Graeme, with a shrug of his shoulders, followed, and they stood, side by side, at the window, looking out upon the roof of the porch.

"Look here," said the detective, pointing toward

the marks of the hobnails on the shingles. "Do you see those marks? Take a good look at them, Graeme, and then tell me what you think of them."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER PRETENDS STUPIDITY.

"A clue! A clue!" exclaimed Graeme, with scorn and derision in his voice and manner, and also laughing immoderately. "I declare, Carter, you're a regular Sherlock Holmes, so you are! I have heard that detectives looked for old buttons, missing fingers, birthmarks, and such affairs, in order to run down criminals, but I never expected to be brought into direct contact with the facts. Really, you interest me amazingly. You do, indeed!"

Nick, for reasons of his own, preferred to appear not to understand the raillery of the young man. He only shrugged his shoulders, and replied:

"Interesting, don't you think so?"

"Amazingly interesting, to be sure," laughed his companion.

"Tinker has hobnails in his shoes that would readily have made those marks," pursued the detective.

"How startling."

"It is, therefore, evident that Tinker has been on that roof since the last rain, for if there had been a rain, it would have swelled the old wood of the shingles and——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Carter. Here is a place where I can help you. I saw Tinker on that roof—yesterday before noon."

Graeme ended this statement with another derisive laugh, which was nothing less than insolent, and Nick feared that if he refused to take cognizance of it, Graeme would suspect that he was being played with. Such a thing would not do at all, for the detective, in order to succeed in the course he had adopted, must not appear to be too stupid.

"The thing seems to amuse you, Graeme," he said, with the appearance of having taken offense, "but your amusement is ill timed, I assure you."

"Oh, you make me tired, Carter; you do, really," said Graeme, returning to his chair. "What do you suppose Tinker would want to kill Spaulding for, anyhow? Ben was the best friend that the fool had in the whole town. If it had been me, now——"

"Well?"

"If it were I who was lying dead, instead of Ben Spaulding, there might be some sense in directing suspicion toward Tinker."

"Why?"

"Because the fool hates me. I horsewhipped him once, long ago, and he has never forgotten it."

"Why did you horsewhip the poor fellow, Graeme?"

"Eh? Oh, because he deserved it, I suppose. I really don't remember, it was so long ago. He tattled something about me; that was it."

"And you horsewhipped him for that?"

"Sure. The fellow is as afraid of a whip as a woman is of a snake. But, I say, Carter?"

"Well?"

"Don't you think you are wasting your time in these queer notions of yours? It strikes me that you would be doing a whole lot better if you should use it in searching for Sally."

It is impossible, here, to depict the patronizing manner which the young man managed to incorporate in his speech. It was plain that he regarded the detective as a greatly overestimated character. Nick was quite willing, for the present, that Graeme should think so.

The detective suddenly adopted another course in his conduct toward Graeme.

"In regard to Sally," he said slowly, not looking at the young man while he made the remark, "has it occurred to you that the death of Spaulding has eliminated him as a possible factor in the disappearance of Sally Cross?"

"No; it has not," was the blunt and instant reply.

"Eh? Why not?" demanded the detective.

"It hasn't eliminated him as a factor, for the reason that I don't believe he ever was a factor in the matter. You might as well charge me with the abduction."

"I was coming to that," replied the detective.

"What's that? Are you about to charge me with the disappearance of the girl? I thought we settled the question at the parsonage."

"So we did—in fact, I suppose. But the death of Spaulding, which eliminates him, must direct attention to you as the only person remaining with whom Sally might have eloped."

"Gee, Carter, but you surely are a romancer, for fair! You take my breath away. You really do."

"I am sorry for that," was the quiet reply.

Graeme started to his feet.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, let me out of here," he exclaimed. "I haven't got time to waste over such fool notions. The next thing you will be doing, will be to arrest me for the murder of Spaulding. Such a

course would be in keeping with your present line of investigation. Really, Mr. Carter, I——"

"Well, you—what?"

"I thought you a great detective, and I find that you are only a very commonplace individual, after all. Why don't you look the facts in the face, and let it go at that?"

"What are the so-called facts that you would have me look in the face?"

"First, the disappearance of Sally, and the very evident theory that it was voluntary on her part—and therefore the consequent one that she must have decamped with some person of whom we have never heard; some third person, who does not at present appear. Second, that the death of Ben Spaulding was somehow the result of it."

"Eh? The result of Sally's possible elopement with a third person? What do you mean to suggest by that?"

"Ben was in love with Sally; you know that. Well, what is easier to suppose than that he somehow got wind of what was happening—of the fact that Sally was making off with some one else, and in despair, came to this room, and killed himself?"

"But he had given up his room. He had——"

"What of that? He knew that the room was unoccupied. He probably had a key that fitted the door. He could enter the hotel by the front entrance, and not see a soul. In a little town like this one, front doors are rarely locked. He knew that."

"But," said the detective, "if the young man had determined to kill himself, why should he come here to do so? Why did he, in that case, first send Tinker for his satchel, and afterward go to great trouble to introduce himself into this room for the purpose of self-destruction?"

"Give it up, Carter. Those are questions for a great detective, like yourself, to answer. I wish you joy of them, and of the rest of the case, also."

With a loud laugh that was not pleasant to hear, Graeme swung on his heel, strode to the door, unlocked it, and threw it open; and then he passed out and closed it after him, none too gently.

And Nick could hear him, for a moment or two, talking in that same derisive tone to those who were waiting outside, and the detective knew that Graeme was recounting all that had taken place.

He did not care about that, however. He waited until he heard the footsteps of Graeme descending the stairs; then he again opened the door.

This time he passed through it himself, leaving the door widely ajar, and, with a sign to Mr. Turner that he was to follow, went down the stairs, and passed from the house to the one main street of which the village boasted.

The townspeople were still gathered in knots around the vicinity of the hotel. Westerly had not had so exciting an occurrence in a long time; not since the mysterious visitations of the Midnight Marauders.*

The people who were in the street in front of the little hotel, gazed at him curiously, and many bowed to him, for they had known him when he trailed down the marauders; but only one volunteered to come forward and speak, and that was a young farmer, who had left the plow to undertake the duties of a reporter on the little weekly county paper, of which the village boasted.

He stepped briskly to the detective's side, while Turner still brought up the rear.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "I am James Loring. I think you know my people; they live about a mile out of town."

"Yes," said Nick, in reply. "What can I do for you, Mr. Loring?"

"Our paper comes out the day after to-morrow, and I thought perhaps you would give me an interview about this affair, that I might write up."

The detective regarded the other keenly before he replied, and he was pleased with what he saw, although it was just a young man of quick intelligence and thoughtful manner, who had determined to make something better of himself than a mere farmer's boy.

"Walk along beside us, Mr. Loring," he said in reply. "I suppose your paper goes to press about to-morrow afternoon, or evening, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case, we have plenty of time. I am badly in need of some assistance, just now, and I have no doubt that you and Mr. Turner will supply the deficiency. Take us to a secluded spot, where we can talk together. I have some questions which I would be delighted to have you answer, if you can do so."

"Shall we go to the office of the *Clarion?*" asked Loring. "There is no one there, now."

"Yes. That will do nicely."

"Well, sir?" Loring asked, as soon as they were seated in the small office of the weekly paper. "I cannot imagine what your questions are, but I am quite familiar with everything about the neighborhood, and if I can be of service——"

*See "Midnight Marauders," No. 643, NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"Of course. Perhaps one of you can explain to me why Tom Tinker, the village fool, is as much afraid of a whip as a woman is of a snake. Can you?"

Turner and Loring had seated themselves in convenient chairs; Nick was still standing, and now he turned his gaze from one to the other of his companions inquiringly. The question was an unexpected one, and both men stared at the questioner; then they looked at each other.

"It's true," said Loring presently, "but I had forgotten it, hadn't you, Turner?"

"Yes."

"Will one of you please answer the question?" suggested Nick.

It was Turner who replied.

"We don't know, exactly," he said, "although the fact is undeniable. I can't imagine where you heard it, Mr. Carter."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" replied Nick. "But, please tell me why the village fool has such horror of a whip."

"There are several stories about it," replied Turner slowly, "but the most likely one is that Tinker, before he came here, was from the South, where he had been a prisoner in one of the chain gangs of West Virginia, or Tennessee, or Georgia—wherever it is that they whip the prisoners for disobedience. The idea is that he was so terribly whipped, for some offense, that it destroyed what little intelligence he may have had before that time. He was little more than a lad when he appeared here, and he has always been as he is now."

"Is he as much of an imbecile as he appears to be?" asked Nick.

"Oh, he is smart enough about some things."

"What is he smart about, for instance?"

"Well, as to carrying out particular instructions. One has only to threaten him with a whip, and he——"

"Give me an instance of what you mean, Turner."

"I don't know that I can do so, but I will try to make it plain to you."

"If you please," said the detective.

"If I wanted Tinker to do something for me, such as carrying a message, or going from here to Warsaw, five miles away, to execute a commission I gave him, I would begin by saying, 'Tom, I have got something for you to do, and I'll pay you well for it.'

"'Uh huh,' he would reply; and then I would add:

"'I've got a rawhide whip, too, and if you don't do the errand exactly as I tell you, you'll get a whipping. Understand?' and the poor fellow would cringe and shudder, paying the closest attention while I gave him the necessary instructions. The remarkable part of it is that if I didn't threaten him with the whip, he would be likely to forget all about the errand, or at least a large part of it. But mention the whip, and you can rely upon it that Tom will perform the commission exactly as he is told."

"Suppose he were told *not* to do a thing, would mention of the whip be equally efficacious, do you think?" asked the detective.

"I have never tried that; but I haven't a doubt of it," replied Loring.

"Thank you. Now——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Carter, but may I ask——"

The detective interrupted him.

"Not now," he said. "Another time I will tell you. For the present, I prefer to ask questions, rather than to answer them."

"Very well, sir; excuse me."

"What is your opinion regarding the disappearance of Sally Cross, Loring?"

"It is a puzzle, sir, which I have not even attempted to solve in my own mind."

"She is an unusually lovable girl, don't you think so?"

"Everybody in the village will admit that, Mr. Carter."

"Particularly the younger people?"

"Yes."

"Have you been to the parsonage, Loring?"

"Yes."

"Did you pick up any information that interested you, while you were there?"

"Very little, sir."

"Did it strike you that Sally had gone away of her own accord?"

"I confess that it did so impress me."

"Now, eliminating Ben Spaulding—with whom she would have had no reason to elope, since he was quite acceptable to Sally's parents, and with whom she could not have gone away because he is dead—who is there,

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOBNAIL CLUE.

"Let me tell it," said Loring, who had remained silent thus far, and at a nod of acquiescence, he continued:

in the village or the neighborhood, or who is there among Sally's acquaintances, with whom she would have gone away voluntarily?"

"I have no more idea as to that, than you, Mr. Carter."

"I will put the question in another form."

"Very well, sir."

"Who, besides Spaulding, has paid her particular attention?"

"About every young man in the community, or near it—and some who are not so young, too."

"Can't you be more explicit?"

"Well, there is Graeme."

"Do you think that Graeme is in love with her?"

"I think she fascinated him when they were together—and that he straightway forgot her when they were not. I think, too, that he held a sort of fascination for her, but it was of the same sort that a snake has for a bird. But he is also to be eliminated, isn't he?"

"Yes; for the present. Who else?"

"Pinckney, the landlord of the hotel, has proposed to her half a dozen times, or more."

"But he is old enough to be her father, man!"

"Not quite; but the fact remains, just the same."

"Do you know what her feelings were toward him?"

"Loathing, I should say. She has told me as much, more than once."

"Has he bothered her with his attentions?"

"N—no; not to the extent of insolence, if that is what you mean."

"Who else?"

"You might include me in the category. I have also asked her to marry me—twice."

"She didn't elope with you, did she?"

"No; I wish she had done so," replied the young man with a wan smile.

"Loring, what is your personal opinion of Chauncy Graeme? Tell me frankly."

"I don't like him. I never have liked him. I think it is all summed up in that, sir."

"Have you any especial reasons for disliking him?"

"None that you could put your finger on."

"Do you think it possible that Sally might have eloped with him, and is now in hiding in some place while he pulls the wool over the eyes of the community?"

"Mr. Carter, I have asked myself that question, in almost exactly that form, a dozen times or more, and I can only answer in the negative. As I have said, I think he held some sort of fascination for her, but what its quality was, or is, I don't know. I do not think that it would influence her to the extent of inducing her to run away with him; and yet——"

"Well?"

"There is no one else with whom she might possibly have gone voluntarily, or with whom she might have been induced to elope, through fear."

"What do you mean by the use of that word, in this connection?"

"It has occurred to me that Graeme might have threatened her—but I don't think the theory will hold water."

"What sort of threat could he have used against her?"

"I don't know. I have not been able even to conjecture that much."

"Loring, have you ever noticed the soles of Tom Tinker's shoes?"

For a moment the country reporter stared at the detective as if he thought the latter had suddenly taken leave of his senses, but as Nick preserved a perfectly placid countenance, and seemed to desire that the question should be answered, notwithstanding its apparent irrelevancy, he replied:

"I have often seen the soles of the shoes he is wearing just now; why?"

"How is it that you have often seen the soles of the shoes he is wearing now?"

"They were mine. I gave them to him."

"When did you do that?"

"Two or three days ago."

"Please be exact."

"I gave them to him the day before yesterday."

"Were there five hobnails in the sole of each shoe when you gave them to him?"

"No."

"Did he have other shoes when you gave him the pair he now wears?"

"Yes; if one could call them shoes. There was barely enough of them left to hold together."

"What did he do with the older pair?"

"He threw them away."

"Where did he throw them?"

"They are on the ash heap in the rear of the house where I live; at least, they were."

"Is it far from here?"

"No."

"Let us take a walk around there. I would like to see those old shoes; or, possibly you can tell me if they did or did not have hobnails in the soles."

"I know that they did not, for the reason that there was not sufficient sole left on either of them to have held a hobnail, let alone five of them."

"You are sure about that?"

"Positive."

"Well, that establishes a fact that I wished to determine. Tinker has not been in the habit of wearing hobnails in his shoes. You gave him a pair of shoes, day before yesterday, which had no hobnails. To-day, those shoes each carry five such nails. Now, the question I most wish to have answered, is, when did Tinker put those hobnails in the soles of the shoes you gave him? On that answer hangs much of the mystery surrounding the death of Spaulding; when we have solved that mystery, the other one, about Sally, will be made clear."

"I don't in the least understand you, Mr. Carter, but I can get an answer to your question very quickly."

"How?"

"I'll ask Tinker. He'll tell me."

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE MAKES A CASE.

"Wait, Loring," said the detective, when the young man would have risen and left the office. "I don't wish you to ask Tinker that question, just now, but I do wish that, during the day, you would manage to see him for me."

"Well, sir?"

"I want you to tell him to be at the church corner—the same one where he says he met Spaulding when the latter sent for his satchel—at half-past nine o'clock to-night. Will you do that, and can you assure me that he will be there, even if you have to threaten him with a whip in order to make him do so?"

"Yes."

"You may lead him to suppose that he is to meet you, if you like. Indeed, you may be present, if you will keep out of sight. You, also, Turner."

"But what is the object of it all, Mr. Carter?" asked Turner.

"I will tell you both. I will surprise you in the telling, but I think that my theory will prove eventually to be the correct one. I believe that Benjamin Spaulding died outside of the hotel and was taken there afterward."

"But, my dear sir, how can that be possible?" exclaimed Turner.

"I don't know—yet—how it is, or was possible, but I believe it, none the less. I do not think that the young man killed himself, but I do believe that he was murdered. Just how it was accomplished, does not now appear."

"But how could he have been taken to that room in the hotel *after* he was murdered, if it is true what you say?" demanded Loring. "The door of the room was locked, and the key to it was in the office. The——"

"He could have been taken there over the roof above the porch—*and I now believe that the village fool, Tom Tinker, took him there.*"

"You believe that Tom Tinker killed him? Why, that——"

"I did not say so."

"No; but——"

"Listen. Once upon a time, long ago, Chauncy Graeme horsewhipped Tinker, and, as a consequence, Tinker not only hates Graeme, but fears him. Both have admitted that much to me in their own characteristic ways."

"What of that? What has that to do with——"

"Again I must interrupt you. You attended the reception, Loring; you were one of the company with whom I shook hands."

"Yes."

"Well, I am rather a close observer of small things on an occasion of that kind, and last night, without anticipating anything that has occurred, I still noticed two things which have aided me materially in what I have had to do to-day, and which have forced me into the theory I have since adopted regarding the mysteries we are facing."

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"Those two things were, first, that Graeme believes himself to be passionately in love with Sally, at least to the extent of determining that no one else shall possess her; and, second, that Sally had already engaged herself to Spaulding. Have you absorbed those two facts?"

"Yes. Neither one surprises me, however."

"Possibly not; but they are important, just now, so bear them in mind."

"Very well."

"After the company had departed, both Graeme and Spaulding lingered. Of the two, Graeme took his departure first. A little later, Spaulding made his exit. Sally followed him to the gate, and they stood there together for a time, talking. When Sally returned to the piazza, her eyes were sparkling as if she had heard

something that was extremely pleasant, and also something else that troubled her. She soon went to her room, after that, and I am convinced that she then had no thought of leaving it before morning."

"That is only conjecture, Mr. Carter."

"It is conjecture which amounts almost to certainty, nevertheless. Now, while I have been going from one thing to another in reference to this case, all day, I have kept in mind those occurrences of last night, which I have just described to you, and now, after piecing them, and re-piecing them together, after the manner of picture puzzles, I have at last got the whole thing in shape. I am so sure of it I am going ahead on that theory."

"Please tell us what it is," said Turner.

"First, let me ask this: Do either of you know with whom Graeme plays cards when he comes here, and can you tell me where they play?"

"Yes, to both," replied Loring.

"Good. I will come back to that, presently. Now, last night, when those two young men left the rectory, one of two things happened: Either Graeme waited somewhere near, until Spaulding and Sally parted, or Spaulding, because of some reason we do not know, sought Graeme, after he parted with Sally at the gate. I am inclined to accept the former theory."

"You suppose, at least, that the two were together, after they had left the rectory," said Turner.

"I feel positive of that. Now, another thing: While we were seated outside the house, after the company had gone, Graeme was constantly munching sugar-coated almonds when he was not smoking his cigarettes. Twice he passed them to me, and to the others. Sally refused them; so did her father, but I ate two of them, Spaulding ate several, Mrs. Cross ate some."

"Well, what——"

"My friends, I discovered another thing, last night, or rather, this morning early, in regard to Chauncy Graeme, and I will explain what it was by telling you that one of the principal clues in my chase after the Midnight Marauders, when Sally was abducted that other time, by her insane uncle, James Stedman, was that I found along the route I followed, many stumps of cigarettes which bore the initials, 'C. G.' This morning, I found that Graeme had been smoking others which bore that identical mark, while he was at the rectory.

"That convinced me on the spot, that he was a passive, if not an active, party to the other affair, and might, therefore, be the real party in this one.

"So much for that. Now, as to another point that is not yet determined. If Graeme is all that I suppose him to be, and I haven't a doubt of it in my own mind, he is a very bad young man, who would hesitate at nothing to attain his ends. Also, he belongs to that type of criminal who dares everything with the utmost coolness, because of a resolution to suffer death at his own hands, rather than be sent to prison—or worse.

"Such criminals invariably carry with them the means of instant self-destruction, and a favorite method is to secrete somewhere on the person, a frosted glass bead, and to fill the cavity of that bead with prussic acid, or with cyanide. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," said both men, breathlessly.

"If Graeme possessed such a thing as I have described, and if he did wait outside to discover how long after him Spaulding remained, and if he did see the parting at the gate where even I saw a kiss exchanged, and if he *were* resolved that none other than himself should possess Sally Cross, don't you see that it was an easy matter to put the deadly bead among the sugar-coated almonds, and then, quite by accident, while still munching the candies, to encounter Spaulding again? There was no open breach between them. Spaulding would not hesitate to accept several of the candies, after having already eaten some of them; but the moment he put the bead in his mouth and broke it, he was a dead man."

"But," expostulated Turner, "how in the world can you build up such a terrible accusation against a man who has been——"

"Let me interrupt you, Turner. I would not have thought of building such a theory against Graeme, were it not for the cigarette stumps, and the almost absolute knowledge that he was instrumental in that other abduction. That was my starting point; and then, added to that, was the remarkable effort to establish the theory of suicide, and the *one fatal error that was made in that effort.*"

"What was that?"

"The fact that the people who put the body in the room forgot all about the door that was locked, and the key which was hanging on the rack in the hotel office—and the part about the satchel."

"What about the satchel, Mr. Carter? Who do you think sent for that?"

"I think that Spaulding sent for it himself, but that when Tinker returned with it, he found Graeme awaiting him. Spaulding was dead by that time, prob-

ably concealed among the shrubbery that surrounds the church."

"But where is the satchel now? Who has it?" asked Turner. And the detective replied:

"If my theories will hold water, Mr. Turner, Tom Tinker can answer that question."

CHAPTER XI.

FIGHTING LIKE A CORNERED RAT.

There was a few moments of silence between the three men after that, broken, presently, by the detective, who turned to Loring, and said:

"Now, Mr. Loring, whether you accept what I have said, or not, I wish you would do something to help me."

"Willingly, Mr. Carter. I will confess that I am rather stunned by the theories you have put forward. I think, at least, if they cannot be proved, they should be disproved. What is it you wish me to do?"

"I want you to find the men with whom Graeme played cards last night, and until this morning, and to learn from them all that you can about Graeme's presence among them. I want to know what time he arrived, how he played, whether he seemed preoccupied—and, in short, everything that concerned him, after he arrived among them; and, lastly, don't forget the other commission I gave you."

"About Tinker?"

"Yes."

"I won't forget it. But, before I leave you, will you explain one feature of your theory, which seems to me to be absurd? Pardon me, but it does seem so."

"I think I know to what you refer."

"Nevertheless, let me ask about it."

"Very well."

"Your idea is—is it not?—that Graeme followed Spaulding and spoke to him *after* he had sent Tinker to the hotel after the satchel?"

"Yes."

"And that then he gave him the candy—that is, the poison?"

"Yes."

"How long would Spaulding remain alive after biting that glass bead, if it existed, and it contained the prussic acid?"

"A moment only."

"So, Graeme must have concealed the body in the shrubbery, and then waited calmly for the return of Tinker. Is that the idea?"

"Yes."

"Well, will you tell me why Graeme, after receiving the satchel from Tinker, and frightening him into a promise of silence, as he must have done, did not send the fool about his business, and then place the satchel and the empty vial that was found, beside the body, and so leave it to be discovered where it was, instead of going to all the trouble to move it into the hotel room, where it *was* found?"

"I think he did that very thing, in effect—or thought he did so," replied the detective. "Possibly he showed Tinker the body, and told the poor fool that Spaulding had killed himself, or had dropped dead. Then, in addition to menacing him with the whip, he frightened Tinker further by threatening to charge him with the murder if he should tell more than he had been instructed to reveal. Then, doubtless, he went about the other business of the night."

"Leaving the body where it was?"

"Yes."

"But, great heavens, man, it was found——"

"Where Tom Tinker later removed it. Twenty-four hours earlier, or nearly that, Tinker had been on the roof of that porch, fixing one of the blinds at a window of that very room. He knew the room was vacant; he knew that the window was not locked, or supposed it was not. The mind of a half-witted person, like Tinker, works strangely and wonderfully at times. I think it is only a coincidence that Tinker should have put the hobnails in his shoes that day—yesterday, but you will remember that the roof of the hotel porch is quite steep; eh?"

"Yes."

"Doubtless Tinker slipped upon it, the preceding day, with his old shoes. In the afternoon of that day you gave him a pair with good soles. He might be sent to the roof to mend another blind, so he hobnailed them. Tinker has wonderfully developed arms; have you noticed them, Loring?"

"I should think I had. He must have developed them in that Southern prison."

"Doubtless. Well, now we come to the point. He could carry the body quite easily, but he could not carry the body and the satchel, too, so he was forced to leave that behind. Here, too, was a splendid opportunity for testing his new hobnails. It was already late. There was no one upon the street to see him, or if one should appear, he would manage somehow to dodge. He could take the body to the barn, leave it there till he put the ladder in place, then convey it to the room through the window. After that, the satchel

and its contents would be his, and Spaulding would not be lying out there in the open. I have been told that Tinker liked Spaulding."

"There is no doubt of that."

"Graeme would not be fool enough to try to take the body to the room, and even if he had done so, he would have seen to that door, and the key; but he would not have done it at all."

"Now, where does the abduction occur, Mr. Carter?"

The detective started to reply to the question—had, in fact, parted his lips to speak, when, through the window, which faced the street, he discovered the shambling figure of Tom Tinker.

"There is Tinker now," he exclaimed. "Step into that back room, Loring, and you, Turner. I will call the fellow inside. There is no use deferring till tonight what may as well be accomplished now."

Without waiting to see what disposition the others made of themselves, he stepped to the outer door and, opening it, called to Tinker.

"Come in here, Tom," he said. "I want to talk to you again"; and the half-witted derelict turned obediently and followed the detective into the office. "Those are the shoes that Mr. Loring gave you, aren't they?" he added, when they were both inside.

"Uh huh."

"When did you put the nails in the soles, Tom?"

"Yesterday."

"You slipped badly when you went on the roof of the porch to fix the blind, didn't you?"

"Uh huh. Slipped like all git out."

"I thought so. Is that why you put the nails in the shoes?"

"Uh huh. Didn't want to slip no more. Might break my neck."

"To be sure."

"Have you tried them, since? Do they hang, now, and keep you from slipping?"

"Uh huh; fine."

"When did you try them?"

"Last night, when I——" He stopped suddenly, and his face assumed the vacant stare which was usually its expression.

"You mean when you took poor Ben Spaulding's body to the room in the hotel, don't you?"

The detective asked the question softly, and as if it were a perfectly natural one; and Tinker nodded, and replied:

"Uh huh." Then he started, and half straightened. "How'd you know about that?" he asked huskily.

"Never mind that, just now. Where did you hide the satchel, afterward?"

But a cunning leer had come into the face of Tinker, and he only grinned in reply. Nick, after waiting a moment, rose and began to search around the room, as if he were looking for something he wanted; at the same time he asked himself in a low tone, but so that Tinker could hear what he said:

"I wonder where I put that whip? A good rawhide whip will make Tinker tell me what I want to know. Where is it? Where *is* that whip?"

The detective had his back turned toward Tinker during the supposed search for the whip. It did not occur to him that the man might attack him. He had not been warned as to that—that Tinker was dangerous when threatened, unless one held him with the eyes, and overawed him.

He was made aware of it soon enough, however, for, hearing a movement behind him, he half turned—and he was just in time to meet the savage rush of the half-witted man, who, like a rat, could fight desperately if driven to a corner.

Tinker's long, apelike arms were thrown forward, and they closed around Nick Carter's body like the embrace of a bear. The talon-like fingers of one hand reached for the detective's throat, and closed around it, and then they fell to the floor together with a crash.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIES ARE EXPLAINED.

The struggle was short, as of necessity such a struggle must be.

In fact, it was so short, that the two men in hiding, and who rushed to Nick Carter's assistance, arrived only in time to see the detective throw his assailant aside almost as if the man had been a child, then leap to his feet, and subdue the fellow, more with his eyes than by the exertion of his own great strength.

And Tom Tinker instantly became as docile as a moment before he had been belligerent.

He could attack a man when the latter had his back turned; that was all.

But it seemed as if sudden recollection of what the detective had been searching for when the attack was made, came to Tinker, and with a half growl, half moan, he slunk backward toward a far corner of the room, where he crouched, and began to plead pitifully.

"Don't whip me! Don't whip me!" he moaned.

Instantly Nick raised his own hands, with the palms outward, and he replied:

"Nobody shall whip you, ever again, Tinker, if you will tell me the truth. But, if you refuse to reply to my questions——" there was a significant pause, and then he added: "You will tell me the truth, won't you, Tinker?"

"Uh huh," was the reply.

"Who was it that sent you to the hotel after the satchel? Who gave you the dollar to pay Mr. Pinckney?"

"Ben Spaulding," was the instant reply.

"Was it Spaulding who was waiting for you when you returned with the satchel?"

"No. Chance Graeme."

"What did he say to you?"

"He said he would whip me if I told that I had seen him there. Then he took the satchel, and gave me a quarter. My eyes are as good as a cat's, in the dark. I saw something in the bushes. It was Ben. It scairt me. I started to run away, but Chance caught me, and held me. He said he'd take me into the woods, and tie me to a tree, and whip me to death if I ever told anybody. You won't let him do that, will you?"

"No; I will not."

"He put the satchel beside Ben, under the bushes, and sent me away. I don't know where he went to."

"Where did you go?"

"To the hotel barn; but I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing Ben's face, lying out there in the bushes. Then I remembered that room where I had fixed the blind, and I knew I wouldn't slip and fall, now. I thought I'd take him there, and so I went and got him. He was heavy, but I toted him to the hotel, and laid him down while I got the ladder. Then I went up and raised the window. Then I went back after Ben. I carried him up and laid him on the bed. I lighted the lamp, and picked the grass and things off'n Ben's clothes, and then I put out the light and went out again. I put the ladder away and went back to the barn."

"Go on with what you did, Tinker," said the detective, when the man paused.

"I couldn't sleep. I kept thinkin' uh Ben. Then I remembered the satchel, so I got up again, and went after it. You see, I couldn't carry it when I had Ben to carry."

"Of course not."

"I didn't go back to the barn right away. I sat down under the bushes for a minute, and then I saw Chance Graeme and Pinckney come along the street together. They went past me, and I followed them; I don't know why."

"What did they do? Where did they go?"

"To the parson's house. Chance went behind the house, and came back with a ladder. Then he climbed into the cherry tree, and Pinckney passed the ladder to him. Then he went into the house through the window. I guess Sally hadn't gone to bed, 'cause I heard Chance say afterward that she'd gone to sleep with all her clothes on, and that her satchel was packed as if she was goin' away. He did something to make her sleep sounder, anyhow, and he brought her out, and they took her across the road; and then, while Chance Graeme waited, Pinckney went after a hoss and buggy. I knowed where they was goin', 'cause I heard 'em say about it, so I followed."

"Did you have the satchel with you all that time?"

"No; I hid it under a pile uh rubbish across the road from the parson's. It's there yet. I ain't dared to go after it, since."

"Where did the men take Sally? Do you know that?"

"Uh huh. To the old Morehouse place. The house ain't been lived in for more'n a year, but it's all furnished, fine."

"How far is that from here?" asked the detective, turning toward Loring.

"About a mile; not more," was the reply.

"Was anybody at the house when they arrived there with Sally?" asked Nick of Tinker.

"Uh huh; old nigger Nance; she used to work around the hotel, for Pinckney, till she got so crazy he couldn't keep her no more. She lives in a hut just beyond the Morehouse place, and tells fortunes. She don't tell the truth, though, 'cause she told me once that I——"

"Never mind that. What happened, then?"

"I dunno. I heard Pinckney say that he was afraid I would tell what I knew, and Chance said that if I did, he would tie me to a stump, and whip me to death. I got away, then."

"What did you do, then, Tinker?"

"I went back to the barn."

The detective was silent for a few moments, thinking. Then he addressed Turner.

"I wish you would remain here and keep watch over Tinker, so he won't talk to others," he said. "Loring and I will find the sheriff and arrest Pinckney and Graeme at once. Then, we will go after Sally."

But when the detective and his companions arrived at the hotel again, they were told that Pinckney was not there; neither was Chauncy Graeme. The two men had driven away together, half an hour earlier, toward the south.

With the sheriff for company, and authority, Nick Carter and young Loring secured a conveyance, and started, post haste, for the Morehouse place, nor did they spare the horses on their journey there.

It was exactly twelve o'clock in the day when they arrived, and the detective leaped from the carriage before it was stopped, and ran with all speed toward the front door. He did not pause to rap for admittance, but, finding the door locked against him, threw his body against it, and so burst it open—and the instant he did so he was greeted by a blinding flash and a report, and a bullet whizzed past his head, and imbedded itself in the casing of the doorway.

It was Pinckney who had fired, and a blow from Nick Carter's fist sent the man reeling into the arms of the sheriff. At the same instant they heard a scream from one of the upper rooms, and, closely followed by Loring, the detective dashed up the stairs, burst open a second door at the top of them, and rushed into a room just in time to discover Graeme in the act of escaping through a rear window.

But the fellow was not quick enough. Nick seized him and dragged him back into the room, where he was quickly manacled with the assistance of the sheriff—fastened with his hands behind his back, so that he could not escape.

Loring had gone at once to Sally Cross, who had fainted, and was slowly slipping from a chair to the floor; but she recovered very quickly under the care of the young reporter, and presently, with a shudder, she opened her eyes, and gazed wonderingly about her.

Little by little Nick Carter pieced the facts together after that, until he understood just what had occurred to bring about all that had happened the preceding night.

When Sally Cross accompanied Spaulding to the front gate, as he was taking his departure, she told him of a threat that Graeme had made against her; a threat, that if she did not at once repudiate the attentions of Ben Spaulding, and consent to an open engagement with Graeme, the latter would not only put Spaulding out of the way forever, but he would find a means to force Sally to become his wife.

And so, there at the gate, it was agreed between Ben and Sally that he would get his satchel from the hotel, after which he would return for her. He would call to her through the window, which she was to have open for the purpose, and then she was to leave the house and go with him. They were to go to the next town to be married, and then on to New York. They were young and romantic, they both knew that Sally's parents would not object to the match, and so the plan was hastily arranged in order to escape forever, as they thought, the machinations of Chauncy Graeme.

Sally wrote a note to her father explaining it all; then she lay down upon her bed, fully dressed, to await the coming of her lover.

But Graeme came instead, as we know. He found her sleeping, and having administered chloroform, carried her through the window to the ground, and thence away. And he had seen the letter that Sally had prepared for her father, and taken that, also.

The murder of Spaulding had been the result of impulse, rather than a premeditated act. It was as Nick had said in developing his theory of the case. Graeme had the glass bead, filled with the deadly poison, in his pocket. He had introduced it among the candies, and so given it to Spaulding, while the latter was awaiting the return of Tinker with the satchel. Ben had been anxious to be rid of Graeme, at the time, and had accepted the proffered candy without question. The consequence we know. Graeme had a small vial, which had contained prussic acid, though now empty, and this he had put into one of Spaulding's pockets, to strengthen the theory of suicide. Doubtless it had somehow rolled out of the pocket on the bed when Tinker placed the body there.

Pinckney was merely a tool of Graeme's, in his many illegal schemes, as were also the four men with whom Graeme was supposed to have played cards that night. They were all members of a gang organized by Graeme, and they were about to begin extensive operations in counterfeiting.

Neither Graeme nor Pinckney had counted upon what poor Tom Tinker would do with the body, and the consternation of the latter can be imagined when he discovered that it had been conveyed to the hotel and left there. The irony of fate was in that, possibly.

And so, what seemed in the beginning to be a great and profound mystery, developed into a very ordinary affair after all.

THE END.

The next number (655) will contain, "The Tragedy of the Well; or, Nick Carter Under Suspicion."

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WANTED—A PYTHON.

Once, when employed on road repair work, some thirty miles from the seaport of Kowdyal, India, while looking for a central camping ground I stumbled upon a deserted, dome-roofed, two-room bungalow, conveniently situated on the hill side, overlooking the road, and about halfway up. It was quite large enough for me, and I saw that a few rough doors and shutters, a coat of whitewash, and a clearance of the encroaching undergrowth would make the place habitable. I forthwith had my tent pitched, set all hands cutting vegetation, sent in to Kowdyal for the necessary artisans and material, and within the week I took possession.

Though busy, the lonely life soon palled on me, especially when I came in from the work and on off days. I was surrounded by desolate jungle, and never saw a soul beyond my native followers and the passing cartmen. I might have got some shooting, for the diggings teemed with signs of various kinds, but at that time I was not an enthusiastic gunner.

However, I was not destined to suffer solitude for long. One day the afternoon of the second Sunday two carts came rumbling down the pass; in front of them walked a European with a rifle slung on his back, a pocket book, with map attached, in his hands, and a big dog slouching by his side. The man advanced slowly, consulting his book and glancing about him, till he drew abreast of the bungalow—with me in the veranda, whereupon he abruptly halted and stared. He was a short, stout young fellow of about twenty-three, and his appearance suggested the globe trotter.

"Good-day to you, sir!" he commenced, after recovering from his surprise; "my name is Gumshow, and I am on a shooting trip."

"Glad to see you," I replied. "Step up the bank and have some lunch. I was just sitting down."

"Delighted. May Kaiser come?" pointing to the dog.

"Certainly;" and when he joined me I added, "My name is Fendick, engineer, repairing the pass road. Where are you bound for?"

He smiled. "I expect you'll be astonished when I tell you that *this* is my destination for the present. But I'll explain. Directly I came in for some money left me by a relative, I started out on a trip. I shot buffalo and alligator in America, did the Rockies, and then came on *via* 'Frisco to India. Here I have had my fill of tiger, cheetah, bison, and elephant. One thing remains which they could not show me in America, and which I have still to meet with in this country. I have traveled to this spot purposely to obtain it."

"And that is?"

"I wish to bag a python."

"Why," said I, "I haven't set eyes on a python since I have been in the country, and no one has ever dreamed of dropping on one in these parts."

"Nevertheless," said he, "I hope to bag a python here. I have been told that a lady who lived in your bungalow years ago had a piano, and that one day, when she was playing on it, a monstrous snake appeared at the back door and so frightened everybody that she and her family fled back to Kowdyal, and with the utmost difficulty persuaded some natives to come and fetch away their belongings. Since then the bungalow has been deserted. Is not this the Naigenarry Pass? Then this must be the bungalow. Now, Mr. Fendick, I have told you my object in coming here, but as you are in possession I ask permission to stay with you a few days—as paying guest."

"You shall be my guest for as long as you like without the paying," I returned; "I shall be only too glad of your company. How, may I ask, do you propose to bag your python?"

"I shall decoy it."

"Decoy it?"

"Yes—by music, which will not only lure the snake up close, but will make it stupid, and so give me a chance of a safe shot."

"Where shall you lure it to?"

"To this bungalow. Remember the lady's piano."

"How about *your* music?" I demanded of the young fellow.

"I have brought a small harmonium along."

"Well," said I, "it promises to be a ticklish business, but I'll give you all the aid in my power."

So it was settled. I vacated my bedroom for Gumshow and moved into the only other chamber, the larger one which I used for dining, sitting, and office work. There was no direct communicating door between the two apartments; to get from one to the other you had to go round by the veranda.

The carts were unloaded, my guest moved in, and when he had shaken down we set about our dispositions.

To give the expected python every facility, I had a tent pitched on a small level space opposite the house on the other side of the road. We looked for the reptile to approach from the back, so all our servants were evicted from the outhouses at the rear and bundled into the tent, which was also to serve as kitchen for the time being. We placed the harmonium at one end of the large room in order that while Gumshow played and I sat by him we could command a view of both doors. We were to have our rifles handy; and as soon as the snake entered the room and subsided under the looked for effect of the charm, we were to simultaneously fire at its head, reasoning that, with the lamp burning, we both could not well miss at a few yards' distance. On my remarking that the light might scare the snake, my companion said that the lady of his story could not have been playing in the dark, and that if the python of her day did not funk the light, the python of the present was not likely to mind it.

* * * * * * *

The first night proved resultless. Gumshow played, and we kept on the watch till nearly twelve o'clock; but nothing happened. On the second night we repeated the performance, maintaining it till even later, but, as no snake appeared, we eventually shut the doors and went to bed. But I had scarcely lain down ere I became sensible of a nauseating, musty smell which was seemingly floating in from the

back of the house. While I was pondering as to the cause, Kaiser began whining, and, presently, Gumshow came round by the front veranda into my room.

"I say," he commenced below his breath, "do you notice a queer smell?"

"Yes, like bad mushrooms or something. What is it?"

He advanced to my bedside. "Python," he whispered.

I bounded up into a sitting posture. "What! Do you think a python is about?"

"I do. What is more, Kaiser is restless; instinct tells him that something uncanny is prowling round."

I felt unmistakably creepy. Hitherto I had been rather skeptical as to pythons being anywhere in the vicinity; now, however, things pointed to the near presence of one of the monsters; Gumshow used an apt term when he said "uncanny." I tingled with goose flesh.

"I shall let Kaiser out," he continued. "If his behavior strengthens my suspicions I shall call him back, throw open the doors, and start the music again."

With these words he crept back to his room, while I seized my rifle and took my post by the harmonium. Gumshow speedily returned—with Kaiser, in a great state of disquietude. My friend opened the back door, and the dog scrambled through. We listened; we heard him snuffing about the veranda, growling, but with a hysterical touch of alarm in his tone. We stepped to one of the barred windows and peered out into the gloom. A waning moon combined with the rays of the hanging lamp burning inside helped us in dimly distinguishing objects, and we made out Kaiser's large white body as he quartered about on the verge of the close-standing jungle. Suddenly, the dog stopped dead, seemed to look fixedly at one spot in the thicket, and broke into a tornado of barks, short, yappy, and feverish. Then, before the eye could wink, the foliage rustled sharply, a long shape shot down from a tree, and, ere Kaiser could move, something dark enveloped him. He gave one stifled yelp, and then both dog and whatever it was that seized him vanished from sight!

"Great Scott!" whispered Gumshow, as we exchanged glances of awe, "the python!"

"Walked off with your dog, too!" I added limply, mopping my face. "What will you do now?"

"Try and shoot the beast, of course!"

"I would stick to the original programme as the safest. Besides, what about seeing? and what if it chose to lasso one or other of us?"

"True. Perhaps it had heard the harmonium, and was on its way here when I stopped playing."

"Possibly. The chances are that it will be bolder to-morrow night and come bang in, when we can act on our plan with less risk to ourselves. We should be nabbed to a certainty in the dark."

"Don't I hope it *will* come, if only to let me avenge poor Kaiser! Do you notice that that smell no longer hangs in the air?"

"Yes; the varmint in skedaddling with your dog has taken the smell along with it."

"Well, it shan't skedaddle to-morrow—if we can help it."

* * * * * * * *

The next evening we mutually owned to feeling somewhat uncomfortable as to the task before us. We had witnessed the facility with which the snake caught that large dog in its coils, and we surmised that we might as easily fall victims to its dread embrace. We began to doubt whether the music would really act as a charm—however well it might prove a lure. Most likely, the python, attracted by the strains, would pay us another visit, but, instead of the spell having a mesmeric effect, and thus giving us our opportunity, the reptile might just sail in and grab us, as it had grabbed that unfortunate dog! However, we had put our hands to the plow, and had no intention of looking back.

"We shall have to be careful," observed Gumshow at the dinner table. "We must kill the brute at the first shot. If we merely wound it we shall be in a nice fix."

"So I should think. We had better fire together."

"How can we—when I shall be playing? I did not think of that."

"Look here," said I, "on the snake quieting down you drop playing and we'll bang off together."

"Yes, that will do splendidly."

It was an old place. The walls were thick, the four windows were more like embrasures, and the original stout iron bars, let into the masonry, still remained. The front and back doors exactly faced, and the room contained all the usual camp furniture; the stone-flagged floor was bare, and a big kerosene lamp hung suspended from the arched ceiling.

We hurried over dinner, and the frightened servants, only too anxious to get out of the way, scuttled off to their tent double-quick. We opened both doors, turned up the lamp, examined our pieces, threw on our cartridge belts, and assumed our post at the harmonium. Gumshow played tune after tune: we kept our senses on the stretch, especially the olfactory ones, for on them did we rely to give us first warning of the enemy's approach. Sure enough, our noses served us: toward midnight we inhaled that peculiar odor, but it came from the *front* of the house, whereas we expected our visitor from the back—as on the previous occasion!

"Don't stop playing," I whispered, as Gumshow looked inquiringly at me; "the brute is evidently mooching round, and may enter by the front door instead of the back, that's all."

He attuned again, but kept one eyes on the front door threshold, casting an occasional glance at the one opposite. The smell grew stronger, and then, gliding slowly in, came the ghoulish head and reticulated body of an enormous serpent! It hugged the ground; its aspect struck one as inert, languid; the mouth was closed, and the eyes drooped. On it crawled; a good ten feet of the fearful shape lay extended; the reptile's movements momentarily became more lethargic.

We were preparing to do our part—as already agreed on—when all at once the python's whole attitude changed. Up jerked the head, the hitherto straightened trunk contracted into undulations, and the eyes—now wide open—stared intently to the front. Instinctively Gumshow ceased playing; we followed the direction of the serpent's gaze, and to our amazement beheld *another snake, equally as large, with half its length through the back door!*

We had scarcely observed the second intruder ere both reptiles, setting up loud hisses, simply flew at each other; their bodies intertwined, and they commenced wriggling and whipping about in living representation of Doré's blood curdling creations. We were spellbound: the spasmodic, circular contortions, the lightning-like movements—which were impossible to follow, the hissing, mingled with the rasping their serrated skins against the stone floor, the sense of our own perilous predicament—all tended to convert the situation into a grisly nightmare. It was terrible!

Possibly they were individuals from different broods, were now meeting for the first time. They had clutched each other in the comparatively open space between the doors, but very soon they commenced to come in contact with the furniture. One of the snakes gripped a leg of the dining table with its tail, and in a flash both leaves were flying in a heap of wreckage against the wall: the chairs followed, and, the fight edging off to the further end of the room, the infuriated serpents collided with my dumb-waiter; that article toppling over, crash went all my glassware. Now, to our dismay, the combat came toward us: in another minute we would be involved in that writhing tangle, for all retreat was cut off! The windows were heavily barred; we feared to make for the doors, lest the pythons should ungrip and launch their coils on us, while as for firing with any chance of killing both, such an idea never entered our thoughts. On they came, wrestling and walloping nearer and nearer: one seemed to be gaining the mastery and pushing the other before it!

"Come on!" I whispered, seizing Gumshow by the arm. "Up into the window! It's our only chance!"

Barely had we ensconced ourselves in the embrasure when we realized that in our haste we had omitted to snatch up our rifles! No time to go and fetch them, for in another second the combatants cannoned against the harmonium. The instrument was hurled aside, the rifles that had been resting against it fell to the ground, and the snakes slithered about above the loaded pieces.

We looked on horrified, our sole hope being that one of them would turn tail and the other fly after it. No such thing happened, for now the reptiles had apparently become exhausted; they were too evenly matched for either to throw up the sponge. As if by mutual consent they disengaged, and slowly crawled toward the doors, one to the right, the other to the left. We eagerly looked to see them quit; we prepared to jump down, rush to the doors and close them. But no! instead of passing out they lay straight on the floor, as if to recruit for another set-to. We realized that both monsters were pumped; we must not give them time to recover; if they fought again, they might discover us. *We must act at once!*

Carefully, gingerly, holding our very breath, we let ourselves down from the embrasure, and, treading like cats, recovered our rifles. We briefly examined the pieces; they were all right, at full cock, and I marveled that they had not gone off in the recent rough-and-tumble. I silently indicated the left-hand snake to Gumshow, then pointed to the one on the right as my property.

"Fire when I say 'go!'" I whispered into his ear. Then, with our hearts in our mouths—as we afterward confessed—we raised our pieces; I gave the word, and the rifles cracked together. We heard a terrible commotion beyond the veil of smoke, and when it melted sufficiently we saw Gumshow's snake bundled into a writhing bunch, while the other one was wriggling furiously toward us!

"Back!" I shouted, springing sideways and reaching the embrasure at a bound. I fully believed that Gumshow would follow, but, when I looked round, there he was standing his ground, and in the act of frantically slamming in a fresh cartridge!

"Fool!" I bellowed, mechanically reloading as I danced about the niche in a veritable frenzy; "back! back for your life!"

Too late! Before I could jump down and drag him away, before he could lift rifle to shoulder, the angry python, with flaming eyes and scintillating tongue, drew itself together and then, launching itself forward, caught the unfortunate man round the waist, shook the gun from his grasp, and fought him to the ground!

For one moment a mist stood before my eyes, and my heart seemed as if about to burst through my ribs: the next, I found myself again. I could not trust my aim sufficiently to risk a shot from where I stood; I might hit Gumshow, but if I merely wounded the boa, it would tend only to infuriate it to a greater pitch of fury. I must kill it outright, and I remembered that to do so I must shoot it through the head!

With my piece at the present, I darted forward to the struggling mass. The snake's squat head played from side to side of its victim: it had yet to complete its coils ere giving the final spasm of constriction. The wicked, fiery eyes regarded me as if their owner contemplated a cast on me as well! For a moment the movement ceased. My chance had come, and almost jamming my muzzle against the reptile's hideous cranium I pulled my trigger and blew it to atoms. Then, seizing Gumshow by the shoulders, I literally drew him out of his bonds like a cork from a bottle!

* * * * * * *

He was not hurt; the snake had not commenced to squeeze him properly. He retreated with me to the friendly embrasure while the python flogged itself into quiescence. The other one had by now become almost motionless.

"There you are, Gumshow!" I cried, as in the revulsion of our feelings we grasped hands and he thanked me for saving his life; "you wanted a python; you have bagged two!"

After examination showed that Gumshow was the better marksman, and had perforated his python's head, whereas I had merely given mine a superficial wound some way down. We measured our game; twenty, and twenty-one feet respectively, with a mean girth of about twenty inches at the thickest of their vile carcasses!

But no more python for me—*thank* you!

ON THE VICTORIA NYANZA.

Four steamers are now running regularly on the Victoria Nyanza. The *Winifred* and her sister boat, the *Sybil*, of six hundred tons each, can spread canvas at need and have cabins and dining rooms lighted and cooled by electricity.

A double awning of canvas protects the passengers from the equatorial sun, but they are advised to wear hats even when under the awning. The firemen and deckhands are half-naked negroes, and the cook and steward are Hindus or half-breeds.

The English officers and a few first-class passengers are the only white people on board, but Arabs, Eurasian, and Hindu traders and money lenders and half-breed traders, often formerly slavers, with Sikh, Somali, and Egyptian soldiers are likely to be represented among the second-class passengers.

The food is well cooked and the variety sufficient for the cost, which is about $1.65 a day without extras. You can have a cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit before breakfast at eight o'clock, when fish, eggs, bacon, toast, fruit marmalade, coffee, and tea are served.

At one o'clock a very substantial lunch of soup, meats, curries with rice and dessert, and a very hearty dinner at eight o'clock in the evening certainly give the traveler all that he ought to eat in this climate. Nearly all the English travelers keep up the custom of "taking a peg" at or after lunch or dinner.

A "peg" (Anglo-Indian slang) may mean a drink of any kind, but is usually a mixed drink, such as whisky or brandy and soda water, claret cup, half-and-half, or the like. The lake water, duly cooled, is good enough for a "cold peg," says a writer in the *National Magazine*, and the tea and coffee are fairly excellent.

BURGLAR'S CURIOUS MISTAKE.

Jewelry and gold watches to the value of £400 have been handed in at Scotland Yard under extraordinary circumstances.

A woman was traveling outside an omnibus from Paddington toward Edgware road carrying with her a brown paper parcel containing two pounds of soap. She alighted at Westbourne grove, taking with her what she thought to be the parcel she had been carrying.

During her journey a well-dressed man sat next to her, also carrying a brown paper parcel. He left the omnibus a short time before she reached her destination. Reaching home she was astonished to find instead of the soap the jewelry and watches, which she conveyed to Scotland Yard.

It has been ascertained by the police that the jewelry formed the proceeds of a burglary at Maida Vale a week ago. It is believed that the man was on the way to the receiver at the time he made the singular exchange of parcels.

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